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"OH, MY GOD! IT IS ADELE, MY DARLING!"

Thunderbolt Tom,

OR,

The Wolf-Herder of the Rockies.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE,
AUTHOR OF "HICKORY HARRY," "RATTLING
RUBE," "DARING DAVY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WOLF-TRAPPER.

A LONG-DRAWN, melancholy howl came winding down the pass, and the sound seemed to be taken up by a score of wolfish tongues, until it reverberated among the mountains. It was not the usual howl of the prowling wolf at large, for there was something exceedingly mournful in the cry that spoke of confinement and the longing for freedom.

A man, garbed and armed as a hunter, came to a sudden pause. He had been making his way up the valley, and was just about to set foot in the narrow pass that led above when this single howl, followed by the chorus from the pack saluted his startled ear.

This man was young of years, but he had won a reputation upon the border that made his name rank alongside of those of Kit Carson, Grizzly Adams and Pandy Ellis.

Reckless and impetuous, he was always the first to plunge into a fight and the last to leave it. There was something of a prairie whirlwind about the bronze hunter, and little wonder it was that his companions had given him the significant name of Thunderbolt Tom.

"What under the sun does that mean? Wolves, to be sure, but there is something wrong about those howls. An investigation is next in order. Can it be that they have anything to do with the trail I have been following? That I intend to find out; I am going up to see just what it all means."

The pass was steep and to one who was unacquainted with its irregularities difficult of ascent, but the hunter recklessly and daringly kept on and gradually neared the top.

All the time the chorus of howls had grown in vehemence; the very air rung with the doleful music from wolfish throats, and yet the hunter made no pause in his upward ascent.

All at once there was a break in the monotonous chorus, and he heard the hoarse voice of a man shouting to the brutes and cursing them for their racket.

An inkling of the truth now came to the hunter, but suspecting that the owner of the hoarse voice would look down the little canyon, he hastily secreted himself behind an outlying rock.

Sure enough, a huge form was outlined above against the fast fading light in the heavens and then the gruff voice rolled far down the pass, uttering:

"That you, Colorado?"

The hunter, thinking that he had been discovered, grasped his rifle more firmly, and was about to step out from behind his shelter, when, somewhat to his surprise there came an answer from far down the canyon.

"Correct! I'll jine you as soon as I can get up this infernal place."

The giant above laughed hoarsely and then vanished from view. Still the hunter remained in his place of concealment knowing that the other who had been denominated Colorado, had to pass him by and discovery might yet come unless he was wary.

Presently the man passed him by. In the shadows of the canyon he could not distinguish his features and perhaps would not have recognized them had he been able to see better.

When this man had also vanished beyond the top of the rocky canyon, the hunter thought it was time to move on, which he at once did.

Upon arriving at the termination of the little pass he found that the summit of the foothill was still far beyond, for the canyon only debouched upon a plateau that extended over a half-acre or more of the rocky surface.

It was not much lighter here than in the pass itself, but he could still make out a rude cabin built against the rocky wall beyond.

Attached to this was what appeared to be an inclosure, running parallel with the white cliff and for a distance of perhaps twenty yards while it was something over half of that in width.

This was composed of tall slabs fastened upright, and fully ten feet in high, so that no wolf could ever leap over them and escape. Thus the cabin and cliff formed two of the sides and the others were made up of these slabs.

Thunderbolt Tom found this out very soon after reaching the little plateau, for he made it a point to immediately get in the shelter of this high fence, from which point of observation he would be able to take in his surroundings and shape his plans accordingly.

His first act after this hasty glance around him was to hunt for a hole through which he might see the interior of the inclosure. This he was not long in finding, but upon glancing through the slot between two of the slabs he found that it was too dark to make out anything.

He was about turning away when a pair of glowing, fiery orbs caught his eye, then another and a third until the place seemed to be actually full of the blazing pairs of wolfish eyes.

At about the same time he felt hot breath on his face, and knew that one of the animals was just beyond the fence. He drew back in a feeling of half horror, half disgust. As he did so the animal gave vent to a long-drawn, hideous howl that seemed to cut the air like a knife.

Immediately the whole pack joined in and the din that followed was beyond description. Knowing just what the result would be the young hunter crouched down beside the tall palings and awaited the advent of the wolf-herder.

Presently, by looking through the palings he could see a flash of bright light from the cabin, as a window or door of some sort was thrown open.

This was half a dozen feet above the pen, and the upper part of the giant's bulky form was plainly outlined against the light that shone within.

In another instant his hoarse voice rung out, and that the fierce wolves feared it could be

guessed, for their racket came to an immediate close just as if a thunderbolt had silenced them, and only an occasional whining noise gave evidence of their presence within the inclosure.

Thunderbolt Tom now crept along in the direction of the cabin, for when the giant had quelled the disturbance he had withdrawn.

Upon reaching the cabin he sought in vain for an opening through which to view the proceedings of those within, for although the shanty was old and rotten, it seemed to have had its chinks well filled up with a kind of clay that had become with age almost as impervious to the point of a knife as iron.

Tom was about to give up his design of overhearing what the plotters had to say, when a brilliant plan came into his head, which he at once set about executing.

The ranch had been built against the cliff by its original owner, whether with any design or not it would have been hard for Tom in his present condition to have told.

All he saw was that by clambering up the face of the cliff he would be enabled to reach a sort of door not unlike that of a hayloft in a barn, and which stood invitingly open.

Without one thought of the danger he incurred, the young hunter began the ascent. Agile as a Rocky Mountain goat, he succeeded in reaching the opening, swung himself into it and lightly landed upon the floor of the loft.

He had found an entrance to the enemy's fort.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN IN MASK.

WHEN Thunderbolt Tom gained the loft of the old cabin, he crouched down until he could fully understand his situation.

A pair of stairs or else a ladder, he could not tell which, led down to the lower room, and through this opening came the light that allowed him to locate himself, though objects in the loft were very dimly outlined by this rough means.

He was soon attracted by a narrow line of light just in front of him and found that the cracks in the floor formed a perfect square.

It was a trap door.

Through the cracks he could obtain a good view of the interior of the lower story, and crouching down he prepared to examine the place and its occupants at his leisure, while at the same time he listened to the words that reached his ears.

The room was low and the walls rough and unplastered. There was no evidence of comfort about the place. In one corner lay a pile of skins, evidently used as a sort of couch by the giant wolf-herder.

A barrel stood in one corner, which seemed to contain meat for the wolves. There was a fireplace and a window, the shutter of the last being closed. A rickety table and several home-made chairs well on to the stage of dilapidation that seemed in harmony with all around finished the furniture of the mountain ranch.

The persons within it soon occupied his full attention. He could readily distinguish the wolf-herder by his giant size. He was a rough-featured man, with a repulsive face that stamped him a desperado of the lowest type.

There were two other men present at the time the spy looked down upon them.

One of these was a *fac-simile* of the giant, differing from him materially only in point of size, for he was much smaller. Such a ferocious little imp the hunter had seldom seen. When he used his voice Tom had no difficulty in recognizing him as the man called Colorado by the wolf-herder.

The third differed very much from his two associates in dress, for he wore the garb of civilization. There was a black mask upon his face, however, and this concealed his identity. His voice, too, was assumed; but when it struck his ear, the young hunter started.

Somehow or other it seemed familiar to him even in its disguised tones. The figure of the masked man was slender and trim, but, try as he would, he could not remember such a face among his associates.

To his surprise he heard his own name mentioned by those below, but this fact was quickly ignored when he discovered that there was one present whom he had not as yet seen.

A female figure was seated upon a chair in a corner, her head bowed upon her hands as if she wept or would shut out the sight before her. The face was thus hidden from his view, but the glimpse he had of the masses of golden hair sent a strange thrill leaping like electricity along the veins of the young hunter while he kept his eyes upon the motionless figure, his ears were open to the words of the trio seated around the rickety table. A rude candlestick fastened to the wall held a couple of tapers made from bear's grease, and lighted up the room.

The wolf-herder was talking.

"Thar ain't no two ways of fixing it. The gal walked into the trap as neat as could be, and thar she be! I reckon our money are earned, no matter how she came to be hyar. Them's my sentiments, take 'em as ye please, colonel."

"Oh, it's all right, Wallace; the money is yours, of course. I was only remarking that you had earned it easily. Half of the job still remains undone. You have not yet put Thunderbolt Tom out of the way, as was agreed upon."

Put out of the way? That meant murder—a sudden shot in the forest or a knife-thrust in the heart while he slept.

Who was this man whom they addressed as the colonel? That black mask completely concealed his features, and while the hunter had a half-formed idea that he had met this person some time previous, for the life of him he could not tell where.

Satisfied with the explanation of his employer, the wolf-herder returned to the business in hand, and laughed at the words spoken in reference to Thunderbolt Tom.

"Me and Colorado know the critter, though p'raps he don't remember us. A year back we had quite a little difficulty at the fort. Look thar; do ye see that?" and as the desperado spoke he raised Colorado's hat and showed branded upon his white forehead the word "thief!"

"That was *his* work! I took Colorado's part, and might as well confess that I war licked by

the critter, though he took an unfair advantage of me and beat me with some tricks he knew. I hate him, but glory p'izen couldn't hold a candle to the feeling Colorado bears him."

"Hate him?" hissed the small man, with a black, venomous look. "Hate the man whose hand held the iron that scorched to my soul when it burned these letters on my brow? I could hurl him into a sea of molten lead and laugh to hear his shrieks for mercy. Let him fall into my hands and the tortures of hell itself could not wring from him more suffering than I shall."

The giant laughed rather good-humoredly while the man in the loft laughed to himself:

"Pleasant party, that Colorado, on my soul! I rather reckon upon remembering them now though the affair had slipped my mind somehow. Before very long, perhaps, I shall give Mr. Colorado the chance he wants."

The man who wore the black mask seemed highly pleased with the warmth of feeling shown by Colorado, and gave him to understand that he could be killing two birds with one stone, carry out his revenge and earn the promised reward, by making way with the man who seemed to be their mutual foe.

"It matters not to me what tortures he experiences before he dies, but I want him to know that the blow comes from *my* hand. Be sure you tell him those words I gave you before striking the final blow. It will make his soul quiver, for, much as you have reason to hate him, I have more."

"We make a nice party all around for Thunderbolt Tom to fall into. I wouldn't give much for his life if he chanced among us now. I'm the only moderate hater hyar, and yet there air times when I feel as if I could chaw up the critter, though I allers kind o' admired him. Thar air one thing I'd like ter see—Thunderbolt Tom without a weapon, battling for life among my wolves."

"Good!" burst from the others like a shot; "the idea is superb. How can it be managed?"

"Easy enough, if we can only lay hands on the critter. Thar air the wolves allers half starved, and ready to tear the flesh from the bones of any man but me. They fear me, but if either of you was to get among them we might save a few fragments, but I couldn't answer for it."

"What revenge could be better! If we can lay hands on the hunter he shall meet that fate. Do you agree to that, Colorado?" asked the man in mask, turning to the terrible hater.

"Why not? Just so I have a hand in his death, I care little how it is accomplished."

"Good. It is agreed then that Thunderbolt Tom shall meet his death in this place. Let him battle with the wolves, my heart will delight in his cries for help. I suppose he can be thrown out from the door where you quieted the animals some time ago, Wallace?"

"Course he can. The varmint won't have a chance when my pets lay their teeth on his carcass. Lucky I thought of that. Here then we will bring Thunderbolt Tom, and he shall be used as fodder for my pets."

The others nodded assent.

"Gentlemen, your plans are well laid and it

seems a pity to me that you lack a victim. Behold in me, therefore, the required lamb ready to be led to the slaughter. Make way below, there!"

With the last word the trap in the floor of the loft was suddenly thrown back, and a human form came plunging through. Of course it was reckless Tom. He had been wrought up to a pitch of indignation that could no longer be suppressed.

The three men as stated were seated around the rickety table, and from the fact that a black quart bottle and a dingy-looking tumbler occupied a position midway between the giant and Colorado, it might be safe to assume that the wolf-herder had stood treat in honor of the occasion, and also that the drinking was monopolized by these two.

The effect of this sudden appearance upon the field of action of the very man who had been the subject of their interesting conversation was startling, to say the least.

No sooner had Thunderbolt Tom struck upon the table than it went over with a crash.

The man in mask was sent spinning backward against the wall; Colorado was buried hopelessly beneath the table, and one of the legs in flying up took the giant under the chin with enough force to have broken the jaw-bone of an ordinary man. He went over with a crash, but immediately scrambled to his feet again, and then, catching sight of the figure standing carelessly there, knife and revolver in hand, ejaculated, in tones of wonder:

"Thunderbolt Tom, by the eternal catamounts!"

There was a sudden pitiful cry, and the girl, who had up to this time kept her face concealed as she shudderingly listened to the plotters, raised her head.

CHAPTER III.

RIVAL BUFFALO-SLAYERS.

Two men crouched among the grass upon the border of a small grove of trees situated upon the prairie not fifty miles from the place where the mountain ranch of the wolf-herder was located, and almost due south of that point.

The moon shone brightly in the heavens above and the prairie around them was illuminated by her beams. Over the grass and some little distance away could be seen some eight or ten dark objects, undoubtedly buffaloes, and upon these the eyes of the couple seemed to be glued, with the peculiar, half-ferocious stare that half-starving men alone could assume.

Neither of them seemed to possess a weapon saving a knife in the possession of the smaller of the two. His companion carried, slung over his shoulder, the skin of a huge gray wolf that had evidently been slain with the knife, as they had no other weapon.

Three days previous they had escaped from the hands of the Indians, and it was only through the kindness of Providence that they had ever gotten on thus far without recapture.

In escaping, their progress had been arrested by a warrior who had been to the spring after water, but his interference cost him his life, as the taller of the two whites immediately sprung

upon him, drew the red-skin's own knife and plunged it to the hilt in his breast.

This was the blade they now possessed.

The taller of the two was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, and from its greasy, time-worn condition it was easy to guess that he was a veteran ranger of the prairies.

His companion on the other hand wore a suit more resembling that of civilization, and from its color and his bearing, one would get the impression that he was a soldier.

These two, crouching in the grass close beside the *motte* of trees, were eagerly discussing the chances of procuring food, their eyes glued upon the objects shown so faintly in the moonlight, and which they knew to be buffalo.

The chances were in their favor, for the grass gave promise of shelter and the wind was blowing in their faces. Had they possessed even a pistol, the work would have been easy enough, but when it came to crawling up close enough to a buffalo to thrust a knife into his side, the matter assumed an ugly phase that unnerved them.

They did not despair however.

The wolf-skin had been saved for a purpose, and the emergency was now close at hand.

The veteran ranger had played the trick on many previous occasions, and such was the desperation of their present situation that something of this kind must be done. Starving men had no business to be beggars, and so they must take the chance when it was presented to them.

Eager to begin, the old hunter took the large wolf-skin and handing it to his companion gave him directions how to place it, after which he got down on his hands and knees.

The soldier obeyed the directions given him, and succeeded in making quite a respectable looking wolf, considering the circumstances and the length of the trapper. When all was ready, the ranger took the knife in his right hand, gave his comrade some last directions, and then sallied out on his strange mission.

When the hunter thus set forth, he had no idea of what lay before them, for he could not suspect that there was danger in the air.

He moved along quickly at first, rising now and then to his knees so as to make sure that he was heading in the proper direction.

When he drew near to the place where the buffaloes were feeding he became doubly cautious and crawled over the ground more after the manner of a wolf creeping upon its intended prey.

This is a trick well known among the Indians of the West, and often one brave disguised in the skin of a wolf, will, armed with his bow and arrows, slay fifty buffaloes. The huge animals have a contempt for a cowardly wolf that comes sneaking around, and pay no attention to the creature.

The ranger had no bow and arrows, and his work would perhaps be a little more difficult on that account, but starvation would see no chances of losing the game, and with eager confidence he moved on.

He was now so close to the herd that he could easily count them, and found nine in sight.

Once again he crept forward, and was soon in a position where he could select his game.

Again he raised his head above the grass, so that he might pick out a cow from the rest and turn his attention to her. He noticed somewhat to his surprise that there were now only seven of the animals in sight, two of them having lain down since his last observation. Even as he looked another of the animals vanished among the grass.

It was a clumsy movement, even for such an unwieldy creature, thought the hunter, but his mind was too wholly engrossed with the matter of procuring something to eat to even think of such a thing twice, and having no suspicion of the true state of affairs, he continued on his way.

Stealthily he approached.

The animals seemed to have no knowledge of his presence, and the heart of the starving man beat high with exultation at the thought of having a good meal to ease the pangs of his outraged stomach.

Again he raised his head.

This time he could count only five of the buffaloes in sight, but the one he had selected as his game was still browsing upon the grass, so without another thought for those that had lain down, he continued to approach her, his eyes fastened upon the game, his breath almost held for the time being, and the knife gripped in a hand like iron.

Nearer and nearer he crept. The grass, though not much over two feet in height, afforded him an excellent shelter, and with such advantages in his favor he did not find it very difficult to draw close up to the buffaloes.

When he was within six yards of the one he had selected as his prey the hunter again raised his head very cautiously, and took another survey.

Finding all secure so far as his game was concerned, he was about to proceed, when suddenly he saw the cow throw up her head in a startled way.

At about the same time a low, peculiar thud reached his ears. He saw a tremor pass over the bulky frame of the animal, then the cow sunk upon her knees, seemed to balance, and then roll over.

The hunter was surprised. He had seen hundreds of buffaloes lie down, but never in that way. He wished to investigate, for it seemed to him that as the animal fell she gave a moan as of pain.

Nearer he crept, his brain too bewildered to catch at the solution of the mystery. It burst upon him with a suddenness that was all the more powerful because of its unexpectedness.

He was now close upon the recumbent buffalo, and still it moved not. He put out his hand; it fell upon the hairy side of the animal, and yet there was no movement.

What *could* it mean?

His hand mechanically wandered over the surface exposed of the motionless bison, and then came to a stop as it encountered something. Ha! it was the feathered shaft of an arrow that had been driven far into the side of the animal just back of the shoulder, reaching the heart!

The hunter, disguised in his wolf-skin crouched there as if turned into stone by this discovery,

His mind had never taken in the full meaning of the signs, else he had never come this far without realizing the truth. He could lay it all to the fact that starvation had blunted his faculties more than ordinarily and he was hardly himself.

The fatal arrow betrayed the fact that there were other buffalo-hunters on the field before him, and these their worst enemies, the Indians. Had they escaped the dangers that hovered over them at the Indian town but to fall into the power of these red buffalo-killers?

His mind was active enough now, and there was need of action.

What should be done?

There lay the dead buffalo before him, and he was starving for something to eat! Let the danger be what it might, he was determined to have a piece under the hump. His knife was in his hand; its edge had been sharpened to an exceeding fine point in anticipation of just such an opportunity, and without waiting to lay back the skin the mock wolf proceeded to slice out a generous portion from the hump.

This little operation had just been completed when a rustling in the grass beyond drew his attention, and he looked up in time to see a wolf make its appearance. There was something singular about the animal. It was of a dirty white color, next to a gray, and in the grass the arms of the Indian could not be seen, but among the hair of the neck could be discovered gleaming eyes.

The disguise was a good one, even better than the hunter's, but being warned by the fatal arrow, he saw through it immediately.

As the dead buffalo screened his uncovered portions admirably, only the wolf head and back were in sight, and these alone might have puzzled if not deceived an expert.

The white wolf moved forward, evidently the red buffalo-slayer was filled with wonder as to who his rival in that line could be, for his eyes must have fallen upon the generous slice the hunter had taken from the hump. Perhaps one of his comrades had donned a disguise and come out to aid him, but there were several things against this theory, for he did not know of their possessing a wolf-skin.

On the whole he was much bewildered and perhaps not a little enraged to find this rival human wolf slicing up the animal that had just fallen a victim to his prowess. At any rate a little investigation was in order.

Hence the Indian moved forward until close up to the dead buffalo, behind which the other mock wolf was hiding, when suddenly the hunter rose up and placed his hands upon the bison. The Indian did likewise and the rivals red and white glared into each other's eyes.

CHAPTER III.

WOLF AGAINST WOLF.

THE tableau was an exciting and singular one to say the least. Each of the mock wolves had placed his hands, serving as forefeet, upon the carcass of the dead buffalo, and with their heads within three feet of each other, glared venomously into eyes that returned the mad stare.

Perhaps the hunter had something of an advantage in the fact that he knew the other was an Indian, while the red-man was puzzled what to make of the form concealed in the skin of the gray wolf.

Sun, wind and tempest had bronzed the prairie ranger until he was the color of an Indian, so that seeing his hands, and a trifle of his face amid the rough hair near the chest of the wolf, the Indian knew not what to make of him.

There was little time given him for reflection. The hunter knew that retreat was out of the question, and that he would have to silence the warrior unless he wished the alarm sounded.

The sooner he got to work then the better it would be for him. There was a great deal in being the attacking party, as he had often discovered.

In his dusky hand the Indian clutched the short bow and feathered arrows that had accomplished all this destruction among the buffaloes, while our hunter friend held his only weapon, the knife, now crimsoned with the blood of the buffalo cow.

Suddenly there came a change.

The gray wolf arose, throwing off his disguise, while the white wolf also sprung to his feet. With an agile spring the hunter, now disincumbered, went over the dead buffalo and closed with his enemy.

Whether the attack was expected or not the Indian was hardly prepared to meet it, and besides, he was not in good condition for a fight, as the wolf-skin had been so secured by his companions that he could only have shed it after some trouble.

The assault of the hunter was so vigorous that both of them rolled over, coming to the ground with a crash, but as our white friend was on top, this was something in his favor.

It chanced however that the Indian was a strong man, and under the present circumstances a desperate one too. When he found that his rival in the buffalo-killing line was a white man, he knew that the feud between them could only end in death; and as in all probability he would be the victim, he exerted every muscle in the hope of turning the tide of battle in his favor.

Although the hunter had gone through much of late, and been without food for two days, he was naturally a man of prodigious strength, which starvation had not yet robbed him of.

He knew and fully realized the desperate nature of his condition, and when he made up his mind that this red-skin must die, the deed was as good as accomplished.

Of course there was some noise made, and the four buffaloes that were left unharmed by the arrows of the red-skin galloped away with snorts of alarm. This would naturally be the signal for the advance of the red-skin's comrades wherever they might be, and if the hunter delayed matters any great length of time he might find his chances of ultimate escape cut off wholly, by the approach of the Indians. Still the red-skin struggled with such desperation that overcoming him in a twinkling was something easier thought of than done.

The white man had at least one advantage.

He was armed with a knife that seemed ready and eager to take the life of the other, while his opponent still clutched the short bow in one hand, and made gallant efforts to prevent his using the blade with the other, even while being choked, for as has been said before, as soon as he sprung upon the Indian the hunter grasped his hairy throat in a vise-like clasp, and although it was so protected by the wolf-skin that he could not squeeze the fellow's life out, yet he was able to prevent him from yelling.

With one tremendous blow the determined hunter beat down the resisting hand of his enemy, and struck home. The steel sunk deep into the brawny chest of the Indian, that presented such a target.

It was enough.

A tremor ran through the form of the red-man, a tremor that could not be described, for it was like nothing else under the sun. At the same time his hand released the bow, which fell to the ground.

The hunter knew that he had given the *coup de grace* blow, and had intended holding on to the throat of his enemy until death came so that he could not give an alarm; but the coming of the grim monster seemed to give the red-skin additional strength for suddenly he made a terrible effort that could not fail of success.

He actually twisted himself out of the hand of the hunter and then a yell of piercing shrillness broke out upon the air. His energies must have been concentrated in this last act, for no sooner had he given vent to this cry than the icy hand of death was laid upon his heart.

With a crash the wolf red-skin fell to the ground, and lay there motionless, for the knife of the hunter had reached a fatal point.

No time was to be lost.

The piece of buffalo-meat still lay where it had fallen. He must have that for they were starving, and this would save them.

Then there was the bow and the arrows of the dead Indian. Would they not come in very handily in place of better weapons? He himself was a good shot, and on the whole the hunter quickly decided to take them with him in his flight.

To gather up these things was but the work of half a minute and then he was ready for flight.

It was evident to him that the comrades of the dead Indian were already pressing forward with all speed, having probably heard his death-cry, and it could not be long before they would reach the spot, when there would be the mischief to pay if he remained upon the field of the late action.

He raised his head and took a quick survey of the surrounding prairie. It was easy for him to pick out the patch of trees from whence he had come, and in which he had left his companion, but it might prove a much more difficult task to reach them, especially if waylaid by the Indians.

Bending down so that the grass would serve to hide him in a degree he glided forward as rapidly as the circumstances would allow.

There was not much method in his flight, for all he thought of was in reaching the timber without being seen by the comrades of the In-

dian whom he had slain and left among the buffaloes, dead as any one of them could well be.

Forward he glided, making good time even though compelled to stoop so much. When he had reached a point about half-way between the spot where the dead animals lay, and the timber for which he was heading, the prairie ranger suddenly came to a full stop, and dropping to his knees, applied his ear to the ground, as if a suspicious sound had met his hearing which he wished to verify.

This he was not long in doing, for he could now plainly hear the sounds of hastily approaching footsteps, not of one person but of a dozen or so.

"They are coming," he said, grimly, "and in case of discovery I am illy prepared to meet them all, but they'll have a tough time fore 'em, I reckon, if they tries to extinguish this critter."

He fitted an arrow to the short, stout bow, and then waited with the stolidness of a rock for what was to follow. It might mean death to him, but he had followed the trail too long to shudder at the approach of the grim monster.

He had not long to wait, for presently the sound of footfalls became so plain that they reached his ear as they crouched there. Then through the slight screen of grass in front of him, he saw the form of an Indian running past.

Another and another followed, until seven had swept past him, all heading in the direction of the late encounter. When they had passed him by, the trailer felt that it was safe for him to raise his head and take a quick survey.

This he did, and the result was that he saw double the number of Indians hastening toward the spot where his late antagonist lay. Without delaying to see more, he again hastened toward the timber where he had left the companion of his flight.

Every instant he expected to hear the alarm cries ring out, forgetting for the moment that he had been making quite as good time as they during the time that had elapsed since they passed him.

As he glided along, a thought that was the next thing to an inspiration came into his head, and rapidly assumed a form that was tangible.

The Indians had without doubt come from the same timber as himself. Although not over a hundred or two yards in breadth, this extended for over a mile away, following the course of one of those mysterious streams that spring to the surface of the earth in certain parts of the great West, and after running a certain distance, giving life to trees and verdure, sink from sight in some cavity, their departure being about as strange as their coming.

If the band of Indians had been in the timber, as was doubtless the case, the white man had not been discovered, for either the Indians had not been on the lookout—they had failed to observe his passage through the grass, or, seeing him had been misled by his disguise and the moonlight into believing that he was a genuine wolf.

One thing was positive; they would not be without horses of some kind, and what was to

prevent the hunter and his companion from securing what mounts they needed while the attention of their enemies was held by their investigations upon the prairie?

The very thought of being once more upon the back of a good steed, mayhap with weapons in his possession, made the trailer's blood leap through his veins like wild-fire, and he increased his speed although as yet he did not act incautiously about exposing himself, as that might be the means of defeating his plan.

He was now within ten yards of the timber belt and already on the lookout for his companion, whom he had left near this point.

It was at this moment that a chorus of loud, angry yells came sweeping with the breeze over the level prairie. The red-skins had found their defunct comrade, the man-wolf whom he had left dead among the slain buffaloes. They would speedily discover who had been there and finding his trail, follow it up for vengeance.

He would not yet show himself but continued the gliding movement until the shelter of the timber was gained. Then he turned to take a sweeping view of the prairie that had now been left behind him.

In the place where the buffaloes had been he could see half a score or more of dark forms moving hither and thither rapidly, and vanishing in the grass to reappear further on. These were the Indians searching for his trail. Even as he gazed upon them a hand was laid on his arm and he turned quickly.

His companion stood there, having noiselessly reached his side even as he turned to survey the late field of action. His eyes were fastened hungrily upon the buffalo-meat carried by the trailer, but he seemed to conquer the ravenous feeling that came upon him, for other matters of graver import demanded their attention.

"You had a narrow escape," he whispered, hoarsely, as the other caught his hand.

"Ay, narrow enough in all conscience, but the varmints must be sharp to catch Strategy Saul napping. I have a plan, lad, which it will pay to follow out. Come with me and don't let the grass grow under yer feet."

He led the way as he spoke through the trees, taking a course that would lead them along the grove lengthways instead of through it.

What his object was the second fugitive had no idea until in a few hasty words the old trailer explained it, and then the fires of energy flashed into the youth's dark eyes.

"We will get the best of them yet," he said, and the other smiled affirmatively at his words.

Their pace, though hurried, did not betray them, for they were exceedingly careful how they ran, and presently, ere they had gone a third of a mile there came from a point just beyond them, the whinny of a horse.

This was a welcome sound in their ears, for they might have missed the spot where the main body of Indians had remained while their spy in his wolf disguise went to his work among the buffaloes, but now, their attention being called to the point of interest, they made straight for it.

Another minute and through the interstices among the bushes and hanging boughs of the trees, they saw the objects of their search.

The horses were there, watched by two warriors, who seemed greatly interested in looking out upon the prairie. Doubtless their comrades were visible from that point, and they were trying to make out what it all meant, not realizing the deadly danger that overshadowed them.

Lurid lightning seemed to flash from the eyes of the old trailer. Before him were two members of the tribe from which he and his companion had suffered so intensely, and the thought of sparing them would never have entered his head, even had it been possible.

Knowing full well that they had no time to lose, the trailer gave the buffalo-meat into the charge of his companion, and hastily got an arrow in readiness, meantime holding his knife between his teeth.

The bow, though short, was exceedingly powerful, and quite a curiosity. It was made of second growth hickory backed with snakewood, and would throw an arrow with terrific force.

Selecting his victim, the trailer drew the feathered missile to the head and then let fly.

The stricken man threw up his arms and fell as if he had been struck by a thunderbolt from the heavens, for the arrow, driven by such a tremendous power, had passed completely through his breast, the end protruding on the other side.

Death must have been terribly sudden with him, for he made not the least sound. Perhaps his companion had heard the twang of the bow-string, or the hurtling sound of the feathered arrow through the air, for he turned just as the victim of the trailer fell to the earth. A cry of horror broke from the lips of the second brave; he saw that a dire fate had overtaken his companion, and realized his own peculiar position, but before he could run a form leaped from the bushes and hurled itself upon him.

Of course this was the gallant old ranger.

Like a whirlwind he went to his work, knife in hand; but the red-skin, though taken wholly by surprise, did not intend to give in and meet his fate without a most desperate resistance.

Still, the trailer had an advantage in the fact that his knife was ready in his hand, and the very fact of his being the assailant was enough to turn the tide of battle in his favor.

Before half a minute had gone by the Indian's guard was broken down by the onslaught of the white man, and the game was over. One sweeping blow, a dull thud, a loud, trembling cry, a heavy fall, and the tragedy was over, the ranger had won.

Quickly his companion now joined him.

Before them were fourteen fine mustangs, all joined in four little groups by lassoes. If they left the remainder of the steeds after selecting two, immediate pursuit would be the result.

This was not the ranger's way of doing things.

He knew that the quavering yell of his last victim would bring the Indians to the spot on the run. Even then they were doubtless making for it as fast as their legs could carry them, and in a few minutes our friends would have found it too late for escape.

Their movements were exceedingly rapid, however, having been agreed upon beforehand. Each of them sprung to one of the Indians, re-

lieved him of rifle, ammunition, and everything else of value they could find.

This took not much more than twenty seconds.

Then selecting the leading horses they wished to ride, they leaped upon their backs, and fastening the extra lasso to the rude rope bridle, each rode off with seven of the steeds.

As they dashed out of the timber on the prairie, a hoarse yell came from the Indians, who were rapidly approaching, and they fired a volley of mingled bullets and arrows, which, however, seemed to have little effect upon our friends.

The old trailer turned and with the Spencer rifle he had taken from the dead Indian, fired shot after shot among the howling demons until they were glad to throw themselves into the long grass to hide from his murderous fire.

Thus, taking with them the mustangs of their enemies, the two men rode onward. Once more they were free to carry out the mission that had brought them to the dangerous wilds of the far Northwest.

CHAPTER V.

"I AM MONTANA MOSE."

"HELLO! stranger!"

A fire burned cheerily in the heart of the great northwestern forest, and seated beside the crackling flames was the queerest specimen of humanity that ever addressed judge or jury.

He was a boy in point of stature, dressed in clerical garments, wore a white beaver with a broad black band around it, and had a face which, shaven smooth as a planed board, presented quite an extensive field for cunning and diplomacy.

When this individual stood up, his attenuated figure was shown to advantage, but the tails of his long black coat mercifully drooped about his nether limbs and hid in a degree their bony proportions. He appeared to have no weapon, unless the huge green umbrella, of the pattern in vogue among professional naturalists, could be called by such a name.

Either the shriveled up little man must have been a cool customer, or else a fool, for when the hail reached his ears he merely turned his head, saw that it was a hunter advancing, and then proceeded with his frugal repast.

Chuckling at the oddity of the figure upon which he appeared to have stumbled, the man continued his advance. He was not a bad-looking fellow, though his face was covered with a gray beard and his buckskins greasy from long participation in his hunts. As he drew nearer an idea seemed to strike him which made him shake like a mold of jelly.

Reaching the fire the new-comer seated himself with a coolness that was surprising, and began to cook for himself a venison steak which he drew forth from some secret receptacle.

His manner was quite refreshing in its impudence, for had any one but a greenhorn been present he would have received the benefit of a bullet to pay for the charming way he had of inviting himself to other people's property.

Although the little fox-like eyes of the dried-up mummy twinkled now and then as they

rested upon the buckskin-clad warrior, he made no sign.

Finally the venison steak was cooked and devoured, the other's pipe lighted, and both men sitting there gazing into the flames, yet they had not yet exchanged a word.

At length, however, the hunter burst into a hoarse laugh that seemed to shake his sides. The queer little stranger looked at him in severe displeasure.

"May I inquire what is the *prima facie* cause of such boisterous merriment, my friend?" he asked, and his voice actually resembled the cackle of a hen, although he did try very hard to infuse into it the inflection of a born orator.

The hunter, after recovering from another spasm of coughing, replied:

"I beg yer parding, my friend, but when I thort w'at an easy prey ye would fall ter the red imps o' the forest or the outlaws that may be found here, the idea seemed tremenjous ter think o' 'em creepin' up all around this hyar camp-fire, mebbe fifty o' 'em, an' when they get hyar ter find only such a leetle critter as ye. Ha! ha! ha!"

The diminutive specimen of mummified humanity drew himself up as though mortally offended, and his action would not compare unfavorably with the majestic movements of a Pitt, a Patrick Henry, a Cicero or Demosthenes, only on a much smaller scale.

"Critter! only a little critter! Sir, how dare you insult me in that fashion? Maybe out here in these savage wilds you do not know me, but in civilized lands the name of Catiline Demosthenes Neverfail is a family word, known as soon as children prattle. In the words of the Jimtown *Eagle* he is 'the most sublime orator that ever addressed judge or jury, and when this famous lawyer arises to plead the cause of the innocent and the downtrodden, a hush falls upon the court that is like unto death, for the words that fall from his lips are as burning coals, penetrating to heart and brain.' That, sir, is the exalted idea his patriotic countrymen have of Catiline Neverfail. Critter forsooth."

"I beg yer pardon; no 'fence intended, but yer size are ag'in' ye, catfish, an' ef the outlaws should tackle ye there wouldn't be much left o' yer carkiss. What brings ye ter this wilderness alone anyhow?" asked the buckskin ranger.

"Business is my ruling passion. To gain my case I would travel around the world. Just now I am engaged on a case, a stupendous case, and have come to these wilds in search of a man. At the fort, through the colonel, I engaged a man to assist me in this search, to defend me against the red heathen, and to furnish me with game, but as Old Rocky failed to put in an appearance, and I was burning up with eagerness to be upon my mission, I came alone.

"Weapons I do not possess except a small firearm hid away in my vest pocket, and which has not yet been called into use, but I do not fear danger. Bravery was always a leading characteristic of the Neverfail family. Why, my ancestors fought in the Revolution, and helped to give us this grand and beautiful country."

When the little lawyer got started in talking,

he could cackle away like a whole team with a dog under the wagon, and the other appeared highly amused, though he endeavored to hide it.

"Stranger," said he, finally, "hev ye ever heard o' Montana Mose, the hoss-thief an' road-agent o' this district?"

"Never," replied the other.

"Wal, that are singular, fur I thought his fame had reached all over the known world. Out hyar he air looked upon as the grandest robber on the face o' the airth, an' ye hev only to mention his name in order ter see people turn pale. He rides all over the country from hyar to Deadwood City, an' thar ain't a pass nor canyon what ain't seen some o' the work o' this Montana Mose."

"You interest me, sir. Pray tell me why it is they don't capture this noted outlaw?"

"Capture him? Capture Montana Mose? Why, I tell ye, stranger, it can't be did. They've tried it fifty times an' more, an' he are still at large. No, sir, they can't git him in a trap. He's taken more toll than any road-agent in the Northwest."

"I declare, I am interested in what you tell me. What is the appearance of this grim robber?" asked the little lawyer, hugging his knees as he spoke.

"Wal, there be various accounts on that score, Catfish. Some say he are a giant an' ugly as sin, others that he are a dandy in dress an' handsome as Adunis. I know myself that these accounts are not true, 'cept, p'rhaps, the last part referring ter Adunis. I never met Mose face ter face, but I've seen him some, an' could describe him to a jury. Ter tell ther truth, he are about my build, and resembles me so much in ther face that several times I hev come purty near being strung up as Montana Mose, w' ch warn't pleasant, ye'll admit. As ter ketchin' him in a trap, it hain't never been done, an' in my 'pinion never will be."

The little lawyer heaved a heavy sigh.

"These western men have no knack at doing such things. Now if they'd engage my services I assure you Montana Mose the terror of the wilderness would be in custody ere a month had flown. Genius is king everywhere, and even vice must acknowledge the mastery when she appears."

The queer little specimen of humanity seemed to be chock full of conceit, and his auditor was fairly bubbling over with suppressed merriment.

"So ye think thar would be no difficulty in capturin' Mose ef they'd guv ye a chance? Now that's what I call a shame, a pesky shame. Kin ye tell me what ye would do in case ye'd come across this terror o' the wilderness?"

"What would I do? Great Cæsar, I'd demolish the scoundrel," declared the lawyer, briskly; "I'd serve a writ of attachment for his head, issue a *capias* upon his body, declare an injunction upon his whole person, and then, by Jove! I'd give a coroner's jury a chance to set upon his corpse in less than two minutes. That's what I'd do if they put me in charge of the Regulators in this here outlandish country. If I remain here long let this Montana Mose look well to himself, for the desert shall ring with

acclamations for the name of Catiline Demos-thenes Neverfail!"

As he gave utterance to these words, the shriveled up little lawyer leaped to his feet and waved his huge green gingham sunshade above his head. His attitude was a study in itself, a model of diminutive grace, and the other could not but clap his hands in admiration.

"Bravo, my little bantam rooster, bravo, bravo! You are the cock o' the walk every time! Ter you I hand ther palm an' yield. Now I admire genuine pluck like that every time, an' I allers feel a respect fur a man who will sacrifice his own personal comfort for a joke or the sake of others. To prove this I'm goin' ter guv ye ther chance ye ask."

"Elucidate—be more precise," demanded the bantam, with a cackle and a swing of the umbrella.

"Exactly. Now, my fighting cock, produce them writs o' attachment, them injunctions, that *capias* an' the coroner's jury. Bantam, wake up an' crow fur hyar are yer game. *I am Montana Mose!*"

CHAPTER VI.

AMONG THE WOLVES.

"THUNDERBOLT TOM, by the eternal catamounts."

Black Wallace it was who gave utterance to these words after he had pulled the neck of the black bottle from his throat and regained his breath.

The tableau was an astonishing one.

These two stood facing each other; there was Colorado half-buried under the table, and the man in mask supporting himself against the wall, while in the corner the girl had started up and raising her head revealed a face of remarkable beauty, though it was now plainly marked with terror.

When Thunderbolt Tom's eyes fell upon that beauteous face he uttered a low cry of amazement and incredulity. Well might he act thus, for in this girl he saw one whom he had loved with all the passionate power of his nature, and above whose supposed grave he had shed the most bitter tears of his life.

Of course it must only be a resemblance but it was so startling in its truthfulness that he could have gazed forever; but other things claimed his attention, for he was among the foes who had been planning to take his life.

With a groan, therefore, he tore his eyes away from the bewildering sight and turned his thoughts upon the task he had on hand.

Colorado had emerged from under the table and was gazing upon the object of his hatred as if he could kill him with looks. The man in mask, too, had recovered his equilibrium, and seemed to be reaching for some weapon. His eyes, too, were fastened upon the young hunter through the holes in his black mask, and seemed to emit sparks of fire.

Thus environed Thunderbolt Tom found that he had put himself into a trap; but he had no fears as to the result.

In one hand he held a revolver and in the other a knife, which shone in the light with a wicked gleam. The three enemies saw their

opportunity, and realized that the chance they had been longing for had come to them.

Like so many tigers they surrounded the intrepid hunter, but he gave a quick bound and placed himself against the wall where he could defend his front and have no fear of the rear.

He did not notice that in doing this he had placed himself against the door that opened out onto the wolf den, and from which the giant had shouted to the animals when their howls arose in such a perfect clamor.

The attack was not long delayed.

These individuals hated Thunderbolt Tom too well to hesitate long when their intended game was before them.

In the corner, the girl still stood as if frozen with extreme terror, not at the peril she was in but for the sake of Thunderbolt Tom.

Her eyes were glued upon him, and her breath came and went in little gasps. Her hands were clasped in front of her as if she mentally prayed that the heroic young hunter should defeat these ravenous foes.

They leaped at length.

There was a sharp pistol-shot and a cry of agony. Colorado had come in the way of the bullet intended for the giant, to receive a wound, in the left shoulder, which, although not particularly dangerous was exceedingly painful.

The knife in the other hand of Thunderbolt Tom made a lunge also as his revolver sounded, but the man in mask dodged the blow. Again it was not wasted, for this time the giant was in the way, and although he did not receive anything like the full force of the stroke, it was enough to draw out from him a hoarse howl.

Then the scene became more exciting, for the hunter was in the midst of his three foes, battling for his life. The girl saw that the door was no longer guarded, and, gliding over to it, she quickly had a means of escape open. Still she did not fly, her eyes were fixed upon the pale handsome countenance of the hunter, and her lips moved in prayer for him.

Tom had been in many desperate situations during his life, but never one like this.

Had his first shot been successful and the blow from his knife equally so, he need not have feared for the result.

Things had not shaped themselves in this way, however, and he was obliged to meet the onset of three enemies.

Never before had that old cabin witnessed such a desperate struggle as ensued. Under the shuffling of the four men it actually seemed to rock. Outside, the wolves, alarmed by the noise, had started a terrible chorus of their own, and seated on their haunches, they glared up at the cabin and howled as though their very lives depended upon the noise they could make.

Despite the efforts of the conspirators, they could not get in a death-blow. The young hunter seemed to evade every thrust, and yet his blade had drawn blood from every one of them.

Again and again the giant attempted to hurl his huge form upon his enemy. If he could only succeed in doing this, he could crush Tom to the floor; but Thunderbolt was very careful to keep his knife at work, and his foes at a distance.

At last, however, came the chance for which Black Wallace was looking. His two comrades had made a fierce attack from the left, when he hurled his huge frame upon the young hunter as though he would crush him through the wall.

Then an unexpected catastrophe occurred.

The door suddenly gave way back of Thunderbolt Tom, and the giant wolf-herder only saved himself by catching hold of the casement. As for the young hunter, he was hurled over the platform, and fell in the midst of two-score of savage, half-starved wolves.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRICE OF A LIFE.

It would be hard to say which was the most surprised, Thunderbolt Tom or the wolves, when the young hunter came tumbling down among the savage creatures. He had received the full benefit of Black Wallace's weight, and had literally been crushed through the door, so that if he did not exhibit the agility and quickness that generally distinguished him, he could not be blamed very much under the circumstances.

The wolves on the other hand probably took it for granted that this was the herder coming down to take them in hand. They had heard his voice above the din, and were accustomed to seeing him appear on the little platform.

Once in awhile he descended into their midst, whip in hand, to quell some disturbance more than usually boisterous, and the animals had grown to fear that whip even more than they did the herder himself. Even for Black Wallace it would have been dangerous to venture into the den unarmed or even with a knife, which the brutes did not fear.

Thunderbolt Tom had been in many close situations, but this took the palm assuredly.

Before a minute had flown the animals would have recovered from their surprise, and recognizing the fact that it was a stranger among them, leap upon him like furies.

Before that time had elapsed, however, Tom had regained his presence of mind.

He sprang to his feet like a flash, and his revolver was drawn from his belt. Around him he saw what appeared to be a myriad of blazing eyes, and even felt the hot breath of the ferocious brutes upon his cheeks as he arose.

They leaped forward with open mouths, eager for the fancied meal. Hunger and numbers made them ravenous, and they sprang through the air like so many leopards. For a brief half-minute there was a confused rush. They seemed to swarm about him. In fact, their very number prevented them from doing more effective work, for, when one animal would get in position to take a piece out of the hunter's throat or leg, some other ambitious wolf would push him out of the way to be treated the same in turn; and this proved the hunter's salvation.

With every shot from his revolver the bullet went down the gaping mouth of a wolf, and he never plunged his knife forward but what it lodged in a wolf's body.

Those in the cabin had not recovered sufficiently to procure a light and look out. The giant had only, by a great effort, saved himself

from following after Thunderbolt, and was but just now beginning to realize how neatly the strange plan that had come into his head had been carried out.

As for the rest, Colorado was too glad of the respite to care for anything else than to dress his wounds and the man in mask, realizing that his object had been carried out, and a terrible revenge given into his hands, had sunk back against the wall, weak and trembling, his masked face resting in his hands as though he would shut out the sounds of that terrible struggle that came to the ears of all.

There were the snarling and howling of the wolves, together with yelps of pain each time the revolver cracked, but not a sound of alarm from the man who was battling for his life.

He was game to the backbone; they knew that before this, and the fact had now been further emphasized. What the wolves were doing they could not say, but were all brought to their senses when a little gray animal sprung through the room and flashed out of the door left open by the girl in her retreat from the scene of terror.

One of the lighter wolves in springing upward had actually alighted upon the shoulders of the young hunter, and from thence gained the little platform.

Brought to his senses by this, Black Wallace took down a lantern and applied a match to it. By the time this was lighted and himself ready to issue forth upon the platform, almost another minute had gone by, so that Tom was given this time to make good his escape from the wolf-den.

This he did in a manner that would have been looked upon as a credit to any man.

Just after the daring wolf, bent on an escape, had managed to reach the platform by bounding upon his shoulders, the hunter made his grand effort. If this failed he would probably fall a victim to the furious brutes.

Hurling himself upon the wolves, he no longer stood there to be assailed, but himself became the attacking party. So desperate indeed was his rush that the animals gave way before it, like a flock of sheep separating before the onslaught of a dog.

There was something in the place where Tom had been that immediately claimed the attention of more than half the wolves. In his sudden descent the young hunter had carried with him a huge haunch of meat that had inadvertently been left by the wolf-herder upon the little platform, and it was this, most probably, that had made the wolves howl so fiercely in the first place, and rendered their attack upon the young hunter more desperate in its nature.

They were fighting for this as well as to slay the young hunter, but he was not acquainted with this fact. When he made his movement toward escape, however, he was ably assisted by over half of the wolves remaining to tear the meat.

Thunderbolt Tom was fortunate in his choice of a place in which to scale the fence, though, to tell the truth, there was very little selection about it for he only possessed the knowledge that the fence was there, and could just barely see it.

In reality, however, he hit upon a place which the wolf-herder had arranged so that should he ever be so unfortunate as to fall into the den he would have a chance for his life. At this point a kind of rude ladder had been formed in such a manner as to be effective.

To this the fortune of war and his general good luck brought Tom, and like a flash he had mounted the rude ladder, just in time to avoid the fangs of his disappointed enemies, who sprung into the air and hurled themselves against the fence, as if seeking a mode of expressing their disappointment.

Then realizing that their companions had a monopoly of something good, these disappointed animals bounded over to the spot where the quarter of buffalo-meat, several dead wolves, and Tom's hat were affording intense amusement for the starving wolves.

Meanwhile Tom had gained a position on top of the high fence, and panting with his recent exertions, tried to recover his breath.

There was one load still in his revolver, and that he was reserving in case his position was discovered. He saw the giant step out upon the platform, lantern in hand, and pressed close against the wall of the cabin so that he might not be discovered, for he had gained the top of the fence at that point where it joined the corner of the house, so that he was enabled to render his presence almost invisible by pressing against the building.

Another thing or two aided him considerably.

The giant held his lantern on the other side, and therefore his shadow screened the corner where the young hunter was. Then again Black Wallace was too much interested in what was going on below him to think of looking around.

It did not take the wolf-herder long to discover the truth, *as he thought*. He caught a glimpse of Thunderbolt Tom's hat, but was unable to see what the hungry wolves were tearing at on account of their number, and for once his voice failed to send them slinking to the other end of the den.

Black Wallace was not angry with them, however. For once they had rendered him a good service, as he thought, in ridding him of the young hunter, for he had not the least doubt in the world but that Tom was being torn to pieces below him, little suspecting that that worthy was within a dozen feet or so of him, covering him with his revolver and ready at a second's warning to send a bullet crashing through his brain.

Even to such a hardened wretch there was no pleasure in seeing an enemy whom he had feared and respected torn to pieces by the wolves. Tom had been a foeman well worthy of his steel and as he had no extraordinary reason for hating him, the wolf-herder felt a thrill of horror run through his frame after seeing the hunter's hat and the terrible manner in which the wolves were pouncing upon the mass of flesh just below him.

He returned once more to the room.

"There's no more to fear from him, comrades; the wolves are quarreling over his bones now. There, hear 'em snarl and fight. Ugh! it makes my blood fairly run cold," and the giant, used

to scenes of horror, stopped his ears to shut out the sickening sounds.

Colorado was the only one who seemed to enjoy it, and his ugly face contracted into a look of pleasure that might have done credit to an imp from the infernal regions. Now that his enemy had fallen to a terrible death, each cut and slash he had received had become soothed, and no longer stung as if the poison of a rattlesnake had been infused throughout his entire system.

The man in mask appeared to be affected more than either of the others. He sunk down into a chair and let his head fall upon his arms.

What did this mean?

He was the man who had so longed for the death of Thunderbolt Tom, that he had bribed these two to hunt the young man to the death, who had been most fierce in his hatred toward the hunter, and now that the deed had been consummated—now that Thunderbolt Tom had met a fate more terrible than any the most fiendish person could wish him to be overtaken by, this mysterious personage seemed overcome by a revulsion of feeling.

Black Wallace was dressing the cuts of Colorado after closing the door that led out to the wolf-den, and therefore did not notice this strange action on the part of the man who had been in the act of employing them when Thunderbolt Tom dropped into their midst.

Outside, still seated upon the fence and recovering his breath as he loaded his revolver, Thunderbolt Tom peered through a chink in the cabin wall and saw this strange performance.

Soon the trio were engaged in a confab which ended in the man in mask throwing down a purse of gold upon the resurrected table with an angry gesture. Then the young hunter knew that this mysterious man was paying them for his death, and he could but shudder at the compact. His eyes mechanically looked at the colonel's ungloved hand which he noticed was as white as snow and as shapely as a woman's. Who was this deadly foe who bargained for his death and then almost wept over it?

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD ROCKY.

WHEN the man uttered those words: "I am Montana Mose," he made a fearful face as if it was his intention to scare the life out of the little lawyer then and there. The effect upon the diminutive orator was certainly astonishing.

He raised his head, snuffed the air like a veteran scenting battle afar, and then surveyed the form of his burly opponent who was still engaged in making his face as hideous as possible.

The man could never tell how his weasened up little foe had got possession of the huge green parasol, but the first thing he knew, whack! it came against the side of his head, almost dislocating that member and causing him to see more stars than he was accustomed to gazing upon in a month of Sundays.

He gave vent to an exclamation of alarm, but had only time to dodge when the huge umbrella whistled through the air in close proxim-

ity to his head. Then ensued a most comical scene. The outraged lawyer buckled right down to business, and exhibited a spryness that would have done credit to a grasshopper. His umbrella seemed to be here, there and everywhere, and, to the bewildered outlaw it really seemed as though the air was filled with umbrellas making blows at him from every direction.

It was a wonderful sight to see that small specimen of humanity skipping around his burly antagonist so cheerfully, while the other was not able to ward off his blows, much less return them.

The matter soon began to grow monotonous and the outlaw thought that absence just then would be conducive to comfort. This idea was further impressed upon his mind when a fierce downright blow descended upon his cranium, almost doubling him up, and he immediately concluded that the mummified lawyer was one of those objects of which "distance lends enchantment to the view."

It was one thing to make this resolution, another to carry it out. However, the opportunity came at last, when the spry little wretch of a lawyer made a stroke that missed its aim and whirled him around.

Like a flash the terrible outlaw sprung for the bushes and ensconced himself behind them. From here he had a good view of the little lawyer, who was still leaping about in the glade like a jumping harlequin, whacking away at imaginary foes, and all the time keeping up a jargon of Latin law phrases that were enough in themselves to kill any man at whom they might chance to be hurled.

"Thunder! why don't I demoralize the critter," muttered the outlaw as he half-raised his rifle; "my head sings like a rattlesnake den. I've a good notion ter skin the tip o' his nose jest for fun. No I won't. Hang me, it's jest what I deserve for attemptin' ter bamboozle sech a leetle innercent, an' I hope it'll prove a lesson ter me. For once I've hed enough o' practical jokin'. I'll hail the critter an' explain. He's a perfect team with a big dog under the waggin. Jest look at him. Seems ter me like a madman or a feller what's stirred up a nest o' hornets around his own ears."

True enough the lawyer did resemble a crazy man, for his excitement had not yet worn off, and he was skipping around the glade, slashing the air with his huge green umbrella as if he saw a deadly foe at every turn, or else was wound up like machinery and had to run down ere he could come to a stop.

The outlaw hailed him, and immediately the animated mummy came bounding toward him with the fires of war flashing from his eyes and the huge umbrella waving in the air in an ominous fashion.

"Halt right thar!" cried the outlaw, and seeing the rifle aimed, the lawyer came to a halt, assuming a dignified position with the huge sunshade under his arm and a hand thrust into the bosom of his coat, after the style of the illustrious Napoleon.

"Now thet I hold ye at a safe distance, we will come ter an understandin', my friend. This has been fun ter ye, but death ter ther frog. We'll hev no more o' sech a frolic, an' ye love

me. My head will ring for many an hour from them gentle taps ye guv me, but I reckon it'll cure me o' practical joking, an' for thet I thank ye."

The little lawyer emitted a long-drawn whistle that seemed to come up from his very boots.

"Shades of Blackstone! I do not catch the drift and tenor of your remarks. For the life of me I can distinguish no joke about the matter. You are Montana Mose—I am Catiline Demosthenes Neverfail. There is an unsurmountable barrier between those two. No, sir; I scorn to accept your hand of friendship. The hand of a Neverfail has yet to meet that of a horse-thief and rascally outlaw."

Then the pompous little lawyer elevated his nose, and shook his green parachute as if to intimate that if the other would only lower his threatening rifle and give him another fair chance, he would wholly demoralize him, which the dreaded outlaw had not the least doubt of his ability to do.

The other laughed aloud, and somehow it was a cheery, honest guffaw, not the one that might have been expected to emanate from a bloody outlaw whose hands were stained with human gore.

"Come, get down off yer high hoss, Mr. Neverfail. I tell ye 'twas all a joke. Won't ye shake hands an' furgit?" he said, between laughs, as it were.

"And compound a felony by making friends with a horse-thief? Never, sir—never, by the bones of Chitty!" vehemently exclaimed the lawyer.

"Perpounding a felon be hanged. I tell ye I'm no more Montana Mose than the man in the moon; I'm Old Rocky, the guide ye hired, but who failed ter reach the fort afore ye left, an' who hes followed ye up ter rue the day he tempt'd a practical joke on such a spry leetle critter."

"Old Rocky, eh? I knew it all the time, else I should have put more muscular power into those blows and have accomplished a little more than make your head sing," declared the other, briskly.

"Great Jehosophat! knew it all the time! Then the joke grows worse an' worse. I beg o' ye, comrade, ter say no more about it an' I'll fergive ye the rough whacks from thet Satan's instrument ye hold in yer hand. Shake hands now an' let bygones be bygones."

To this the little lawyer readily assented and the two crossed palms, after which Old Rocky sat down to join his employer in a smoke.

He knew that the mummy's fire was a dangerous thing that might draw enemies to the spot, even as it had drawn him, and so it was at once extinguished. Of course there was no means of telling whether it had already done any harm. That would become more evident as the time passed on, and perhaps in a way far from pleasant.

The old Rocky Mountain ranger found the little lawyer to be a good companion, full of humor and stories of comical events which he would tell with a droll face that enhanced the joke.

He could also appreciate a good story, and

Old Rocky soon found that he had a *companion de voyage* who was after his own heart.

Having had a good sample of the lawyer's prowess, he was able to look upon him with respect. It would have been his greatest delight to have seen some other innocent stir the mummy up as he had done, and in his heart Old Rocky fervently prayed that such might be the case ere long.

That he was gratified, though in a somewhat different way from that which he longed for, the reader will presently see. These two strange worthies were not the only souls abroad that night in all the great black forest, nor were they fated to continue long in the lazy luxury of their pipes.

Through the undergrowth stealthy figures were creeping with the noiseless action of cats. Their only guide was the sharp voice of the little lawyer, which he occasionally raised to an exceedingly high pitch, or it might be the fire from their pipes.

At one time the mummy lit a match in order to replenish the fire of his pipe, and this gave the creeping figures a fine chance to observe their whereabouts.

The forward movement was continued, and it seemed as though they would actually reach the two men before their presence was discovered; and so they would, had it all rested with the lawyer.

Old Rocky, however, was continually on the lookout for danger. When his surroundings seemed most peaceful, he suspected a lurking peril that would perhaps come like a clap of thunder in its suddenness.

His ear, therefore, being attuned to such emergencies, caught the slight noise made by some of the shadowy figures in creeping forward, and in an instant the old hunter was on the alert. Some of the prowlers must have forgotten that there was a bright line along the horizon back of them, for presently the hunter awoke to the necessities of the occasion, saw several heads decorated with feathers plainly outlined against this light background.

"Professor," he said, in a sibilant whisper that reached the ears it was intended for and no others, "don't get skeered, but I want ter let ye know thet we are surrounded by Injuns!"

Whether the little lawyer believed him or not it would be hard to say. He remembered that it was human for a man to want revenge, and would not have been surprised if it was discovered that Old Rocky was just trying to alarm him in order to get some satisfaction out of the business.

However that might be, he was determined that the laugh should not be on him, taking it for granted that this was his line of thinking, for he did not exhibit the least show of uneasiness.

Old Rocky took his pipe and expectorated a lot of tobacco-juice into the bowl, effectually extinguishing it. The lawyer, not being a chewer, had no other method than to empty the bowl of his pipe upon the ground, which he proceeded to do.

It chanced that while they had been lounging about, the cork of Old Rocky's powder-horn had come out. He had only lost a handful or

two of the precious article, but fate would have it that the little mummy should empty his pipe directly upon the lost powder. There could be but one result.

A sudden flash, a cloudy white smoke, and up went the little lawyer like a sky-rocket.

Probably his ascent was mainly due to his alarm and the fact of his having been seated tailor-fashion, for there was not enough powder upon the ground to have done much toward assisting his rising, for it was lying there loose instead of being packed.

At any rate he rose quicker than ever before in his life, and old Rocky, realizing that the worst had now come, also sprung erect, picking up his rifle as he did so, in order to be ready for business.

Although the Blackfeet did not understand what it was raised the little lawyer, it dawned upon their minds that their approach must have been discovered, and so with one accord they sprung erect, and gave vent to thrilling war-cries.

Then came the sharp report of the old ranger's rifle, and a death-shriek could be heard far above the noise created by the attack. The lawyer had armed himself with his umbrella, and was already hopping about like a harlequin, ready for business, while old Rocky has hastily secured his rifle to his back, and stood there in a half-crouching attitude, a revolver in each hand, waiting for the advent of the yelling demons who were breaking through the bushes.

CHAPTER IX.

TEMPEST-TOSSED.

"HALT!"

The voice was that of a woman, but there was something so commanding in its tones that the bravest might have come to a pause from surprise, if nothing more.

A solitary man on horseback was pursuing his way down a lonely defile among the hills when this summons fell upon his ears. It was accompanied by the clicking of a revolver-hammer, and the mounted man turned hastily in the direction from whence the double summons came.

The gray light of morning was spreading over the mountains and prairies, giving them that strange pallor so peculiar and yet so familiar to all who are early risers. The night fog was rising.

Although the light was not very strong it revealed the fact that this mounted person was no other than the mysterious man in mask, whose actions had been so strange at the cabin of the wolf herder not many hours before, showing a terrible animosity toward Thunderbolt Tom until it seemed certain that he had met an awful fate, and then giving way to an emotion that seemed strangely like remorse, if such a thing was possible.

The person who had commanded him to halt with such a convincing argument as a leveled revolver, was no other than the young girl whom we saw in the cabin of Black Wallace, a prisoner, and who made her escape at the time Thunderbolt Tom was pushed through the opening into the wolf-den.

Her face showed a different aspect from that

which we last saw upon it. All traces of fear had entirely vanished and in their stead could be seen a determination to do something terrible if provoked beyond a certain line already marked out.

The little silver-mounted revolver was held steadily on a line with the head of the strange man in mask, and it was very evident that she intended keeping him under cover during the interview.

When the horseman saw who it was obstructing his path, he gave vent to a little exclamation of surprise and consternation.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"That you will soon learn. I am not a prisoner now and you are in my power. Did Thunderbolt Tom die last night?" demanded the girl.

"He did," came the answer from the man in mask.

Not a cry escaped her lips, but a sudden whiteness could be seen upon her face. One would think she was about to faint, but she pressed her lips and refrained from showing any further emotion. That she trembled, however, could be seen from the manner in which the revolver wavered, but no sooner did the other make a movement with his hand as if he, too, would draw a weapon, than it covered him directly.

"Hold, right there! You are to blame for the death of Thunderbolt Tom, and you alone."

"I know it and I glory in it. Of all this world mine should be the hand that sent him to his death. I swore a terrible oath that I would kill him, and I have kept my word. It was also through my hand that you were captured last night, though fate seemed to draw you on into the clutches of the wolf-herder in time to see Thunderbolt Tom in our power. I am glad now that you have escaped. I thought then that you should share his doom, but now I see that his death has fully satisfied me—overwhelmed me."

The strange horseman paused, for emotion seemed to choke his further utterance. The eyes of the girl were bent upon him keenly; but seemed to be reading every outline carefully, and some suspicion was being gradually changed into a certainty.

"Ha!" she suddenly exclaimed, "you deceive me no longer; I know your secret."

The other started violently, and the black eyes were hastily fastened upon the fair, determined face of the girl.

"You hated Thunderbolt Tom; why it was thus I am determined to find out, for it concerns me and how my memory of him shall remain. I have found you out; *you are a woman!*"

"There is no need of denying it, since you have been so shrewd to discover what others have never suspected. I am a woman, a native of the South. The blood of an old family runs through my veins. Your face tells of your incredulity, my fair maiden, but I shall tell you my story since you have unearthed my secret, and whether you blame me or not, I have been fully justified in my course in thus disguising myself and pursuing to the death one who wronged me and jilted me."

The strange girl leaned forward in her saddle

as she spoke, while the hand of the other holding the little silver-mounted revolver fell to her side. Her blue eyes were fastened upon the girl mounted on the horse with a questioning gaze, as if she feared, yet longed to hear the story in which Thunderbolt Tom was intimately concerned, and because of which he had lost his life.

"My name is Adele Cummings," began the disguised girl, "and my home has always been in the South. When my father, who was a colonel in the late war, died, my only relative was an aunt in Arkansas, to whom I went, and with whom I have remained up to the time when the culminating event occurred which I am about to relate.

"They called me beautiful. Whether I ever possessed any right to that name you shall judge for yourself, only you must acknowledge that all the trouble and pain through which I have gone has been enough to mar the softness of any woman's loveliness of feature."

As she spoke, she quickly and dexterously removed the black mask that had covered her features, and also the broad hat. A mass of luxuriant hair, black as the raven's wing, and glossy as spun silk, fell down, covering her shoulders. The gray morning light fell upon her face and revealed the fact that it was ravishingly beautiful.

She had done well to hide it behind a mask, for those bandits of the border among whom her mission had carried her, would have forgotten all else had they but discovered that she was a woman and have seen that lovely face.

It was of the pure Southern type, but her skin was fair as the hue of a lily, and her features so perfect, that with her dazzling black eyes—that could melt with tenderness, weep with sorrow, or flash with scorn—she presented a picture such as Raphael might have done well in transferring to canvas.

"You do not see me as I was before this terrible sorrow came to me. I am a desperate woman now, one to whom life holds no pleasure, whose only love died with that false man, whom trouble has unsexed and made an avenger of her own wrongs. Imagine Adele Cummings an innocent girl, supremely happy in her love, and seeing no cloud upon the bright horizon of her life. Then you will see her as she was when Tom Reynolds first met her a year ago this very summer."

The blue-eyed girl started violently, which action did not escape the eyes of the other.

"You, yourself, remember that he was absent from this neighborhood at the time, and for nearly four months; during that time he was in the South. I have found out that his excuse was he had to see about some property to which he had fallen heir. Am I not right?"

"So far you are," replied the other, slowly.

"It was October when he left me; it was November when he came back to you?"

The blue-eyed girl nodded her head. This new proof of her lover's unworthiness seemed to have taken from her all the power of speech.

"He lied to me in more ways than one, for he told me he was a soldier taking a furlough. Did I believe him? My soul, I loved and trusted that man so that I would have believed any-

thing he told me, and because of this worshipful homage I gave him, the greater came the revulsion of feeling when I learned of his duplicity.

"I loved him from the first as only a Southern girl can love, with a heart of fire. To me he seemed so manly, so handsome, so noble and true that my heart went out to him, and, ah, me! never returned. From that hour my life was in his hands.

"He deceived me fully, and telling me that he had a rich old uncle very near his end, whose heir he would probably be, unless he angered him, gained my consent to a secret marriage.

"Heaven help me! my heart seems to be breaking with mingled sorrow and mortification when I think of how happy I was during that brief time. Poor fool, I could not see the dark cloud before me, knew nothing of it until it burst and I was overwhelmed in the storm of despair, ruin and unconscious sin.

"One day—will I ever forget it—Donald Warren came to see me. Donald had loved me before I saw Tom Reynolds but I could never think enough of him to return it, though he had always been good to me, hoping on for the best and trusting that some day I would change my mind.

"I have a letter for you, Adele," he said as he entered; "I met Captain Reynolds riding furiously along the river road as if on a matter of life and death and he begged me to give you this.

"Then he handed me a sealed letter in Tom's own handwriting. Some undefinable sense of coming woe possessed me and made me weak, but summoning all my resolution I tore it open and read. Here is the letter just as it was given to me."

As the sorrow-stricken girl spoke she handed the missive to the other. It was a crumpled piece of paper and bore the signs of much reading, while the marks of tear-drops could be seen upon the sheet. Heaven alone knew how much agony that letter had caused the girl who owned it, and what wild bursts of anguish it had witnessed each time of its perusal.

This was what Milly Torrence the blue-eyed maiden read, while her heart seemed to cease beating:

"ADELE:—

"I am leaving you now—forever. The past has been a happy one so far as I knew you but the dream is broken now. Perhaps you will be glad to know that our marriage was a sham, and that you are free to accept of Donald Warren. My best wishes for your future. It will be useless to hunt for me. What I told you about my being a soldier was false.

"Your friend, TOM REYNOLDS."

With a low cry Millie read the name attached to this epistle. Then she handed it back.

"It was infamous, whoever wrote it, but it is hard to believe that Tom did so, though the writing resembles his hand. Go on, I beg of you."

Adele put the letter away with a hand that trembled in spite of herself.

"I saved that intending to show it to the traitor when he lay dying at my feet; now there is no chance for that, but I shall keep it still.

"When I read that I felt as though I should faint, but my will was powerful and I smiled. Donald saw the pain, though, and he cried:

"That villain has deserted you, Adele; I know it. I feel it. Oh, that I had guessed it when I met him; he would never have lived to boast of his work. Let me comfort you, Adele. I love you so well that with my name I will shield your honor. Fly with me from this accursed spot and be my wife. The future may be a happy one yet."

"So he pleaded and raved but I was firm. Poor Donald! he loved me so. I put him off until the morrow, and he left me. To this day I have not seen him.

"That very night I fled, disguised in the clothes of my dead brother. Reaching the settlement I perfected my assumed character by a false mustache, and then sought for the man who had deceived me. Far and near I hunted for him, and finally in the Northwest I got track of Tom Reynolds. The rest you know.

"He did not seem to recognize me in the cabin, but I did him, though he had changed somewhat and grown brown. When I realized that he had gone to his death I thought I should faint away. That moment revealed to me how deathless love could be in a woman's heart. Even since that day I learned of his perfidy I had let my hate boil and bubble over, but no sooner was he dead than love burst its bonds again and rose triumphant.

"Once he was mine, and in death it seemed that he belonged to me again. Yes, at this moment, base though his action was toward me, I love him still, and shall continue to regard him with that affection that lasts beyond the grave. I glory in it instead of feeling ashamed. Once I trusted in him as in my Maker, and though the idol is broken, the remembrance of what he has been to me will never fade from my heart.

"I do not know your history or your name. All I know is that you, too, loved Tom Reynolds, and it was my first intention to gain my revenge through you; but something tells me that you, too, have found out the dross in his nature. Perhaps your story is not unlike mine. You have suffered; that I can see on your face; but you cold Northern people are not like us of the South. Their blood flows like rich wine and revenge is the result of injury.

"Both of us have suffered through him. He is dead now; let him rest in peace. There is no war between us; I love you already, sweet girl. Come, let us be sisters; will you not?"

Milly started back with a gesture.

"No, never! How can I, when there is blood on your hands—the blood of the man I loved? A shadow came between us, but his death has brushed that away. I do not fully believe your story. Let us part here. Each can go her way and let memory form a tomb for our lost love."

"Be it so," returned the proud Southern girl; "then here we part, but something tells me we shall meet again, that the future holds something in store for you and I which will bring us together. Farewell."

A ringing of horse's hoofs and she was gone.

Would those two children of fate ever meet again?

CHAPTER X.

THE ASSASSIN'S BULLET.

THUNDERBOLT TOM had seen enough of the strange drama within the wolf-herder's cabin, and, with a feeling of thankfulness in his heart for having escaped such a terrible danger, left.

Still, his thoughts were not so much on that as the other things connected with it. Who those two parties were—the strange masked man whose actions had been so queer, and the girl, who in form and feature resembled his dead love so much—he would have given years of his life to discover.

This seemed impossible so far as the present was concerned, but in the future he might hope to learn something of them, especially as he intended to haunt the neighborhood with that object in view.

One advantage he had that might prove useful to him some time. They all believed him dead. It was to them a settled fact that they thought his body had been torn to pieces by the wolves, and should he chance to meet any of them in the future, they would be apt to look upon him somewhat in the light of a ghost, which he was far from being.

"I'll unravel both of these mysteries before I leave this place. What right has that girl to resemble my love whom I lost in death? Ah! the bitter memory of that cruel fate overwhelms me at times, and I feel as though death itself would to me be a blessed relief. I shall bide my time and follow her to eternity, where the little difference between us will be lost in the magnitude of our happiness.

"It is wonderful what a resemblance this girl bears to her, my sainted sweetheart. I thought so when I saw her footprints, and later on as I gazed upon her form through the hole in the floor, but when she looked me full in the face I gasped for breath.

"What a terrible thing it is to have one adored under the sod, and meet a perfect living, breathing picture of her in the flesh. The shock is enough to unstring all one's nerves, and after such excitement I feel as weak as a cat."

Thus soliloquizing, the young hunter made his way down the canyon and afterward plunged into the depths of the valley. It was his intention to remain in the neighborhood until at least something turned up that would give him a chance to unravel the strange mystery surrounding those two.

That the colonel might be a woman he had several times suspected, for his keen eyes, more cunning than those of Black Wallace and his rough companion, had traced a delicate symmetry of form hardly suitable to any except one of those slight willowy men with narrow waists after the style of the noted scout and plainsman Wild Bill.

This thought he had banished as often as it appeared, for he had never offended a woman in his life, having fought shy of their company up to the time of his meeting the girl whom he had loved so tenderly, and then it was her unusual charms that had attracted him.

On the whole it would have to be put aside as one of those mysteries that time alone could explain, and Tom finally turned his attention to

other matters. He wandered on, scarcely knowing whither he was going, until finally, when an hour more had passed, he found himself beside a hollow tree, the cavity of which would serve him well as a place for sleep.

He was wearied both from the tramp of the preceding day and the exertions of the night, and forgetting all the strange occurrences that had come to pass since sundown, he lost himself in slumber.

He slept peacefully until dawn.

When he once more made his appearance outside of the tree, the eastern sky was showing by its golden glory the nearness of the sun. Presently the glorious king of day peeped above the horizon and gave his light to the world.

Thunderbolt Tom speedily shot an antelope, and building a fire had some steaks broiling.

He dispatched his breakfast and made a bundle of the remainder of the cooked steaks for future use. He was not afraid of his fire being discovered by the smoke, for having been made of dry wood, what little smoke there was could hardly be detected in the atmosphere close at hand, while at a little distance it was invisible.

Once more Tom was stalking through the forest in an aimless sort of way.

His thoughts, naturally enough, were upon the occurrences of the previous night, but his success at unraveling the mysteries that had come up, was no better than at that time. He had seen the maker of those mysterious footprints, and been amazed at her resemblance to his dead love, but could get no satisfaction out of the meeting. He must see her again, face to face, and learn something of her. Perhaps this strange resemblance would fade away when brought under the scrutiny of his eyes on an occasion more suitable for observing than the last had been.

Higher rose the sun in the heavens and still the young hunter continued his aimless tramp.

Although his thoughts were far away, his eyes were on the alert, and all at once he dropped to the earth as if he had been shot.

The reason of this strange action was speedily made manifest for the sharp crack of a rifle sounded upon the morning air and a bullet whistled by within half a foot of his head as he sunk down.

The shot came from the bushes close at hand, and would have been a fatal one but that the quick eye of the young hunter had seen the leveled rifle and the dim figure of a crouching man among the undergrowth in time to avoid the deadly bullet.

No sooner had the shot been fired than the reckless young hunter, rolling over several times in the carrying out of his idea formed on the instant, sprung to his feet and bounded into the bushes where his unknown foe and would-be assassin had secreted himself to accomplish his dread work.

The man had realized that his shot must have missed, but the actions of Thunderbolt Tom had been so rapid as to confuse him, and before he could even rise from his knees the young hunter was upon him.

Dropping his rifle, Thunderbolt Tom leaped upon the assassin. His strong hands seized him

by the throat, and closed like a vise upon his windpipe. When a man's supply of air is thus summarily shut off, he is not capable of showing his powers to advantage, no matter what an amount of strength he may possess, and the fellow upon whom Thunderbolt Tom hurled himself was no exception to the common rule.

Notwithstanding this fact he developed quite an amount of strength, and the young hunter found it hard work to force him into such a position that there was nothing left for him but to give in.

His ceasing to struggle was an indication to this effect, and Thunderbolt Tom acknowledged it by removing his hands from the throat of his adversary.

He had dropped his rifle and now taking a revolver from his belt he aimed it at the head of his recumbent enemy, so as to be ready in case the other attempted any trick upon him.

His foe lay there quietly however, showing no sign of uneasiness save in the half-frightened look in his eyes. Tom knew him not, had never seen his face before to his knowledge, and was at a loss to understand why the man wished to murder him.

He did not have the appearance of a desperado either in features or dress, so that it seemed possible that he had some other motive for desiring the young hunter's death besides love of gain or bloodshed.

"You have me foul, Tom Reynolds; fire and end the whole business. I have played a heavy game and lost too, I reckon. Shoot and get through with it," he growled.

Tom Reynolds!

Then he was known to the other who appeared to have some grudge against him, but the young hunter was ready to swear that he had never before set eyes on this individual. He was not in a mood for trifling however, and although he allowed the other to rise he still kept him well covered with his ready revolver.

"Now, see here; I don't know you or what you have against me, but if you ever try that dastardly shooting dodge again, you'll never leave the spot alive. I am Tom Reynolds but I neither know anything about you nor why you have cause to hate and waylay me, nor do I care to. I will not take your life, for I think you have made a serious mistake, a repetition of which may cost you dear. I have warned ye, now beware!"

Turning, Thunderbolt Tom walked away from the spot, leaving the other to look after him as he picked up his rifle and plunged into the dense forest.

"Death and furies!" exclaimed the man, scowling fiercely, "I have failed again. Can that man bear a charmed life? The chance was mine, and I missed. It was Tom Reynolds; he acknowledged that, and I could swear to the fact, but, why did he not know me? Has Donald Warren changed so much as that? So much the better then for my plan. I am determined he shall not see Adele, for that would ruin all. Ah! he thinks she fled with Donald Warren, and yet he did not know me! It was a mercy he did not. Can he have lost his mind? He did not look insane. Well, I intend to make sure

work next time, and if I miss he is welcome to all the satisfaction he can get.

So saying, Donald Warren, Adele's old lover, also plunged into the woods.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAWYER IN LUCK.

OLD ROCKY had not long to wait for the expected attack.

He could see forms hurrying through the bushes in all directions, as if his shot had been the means of telling him that their advance and presence had been discovered by the ever-vigilant whites.

The rifle-shot had been fatal to one of the dusky heathens, and while his death-shriek had enraged the rest, it also at the same time taught them a lesson, for in that very uncertain light none but a deadly marksman could have aimed to kill.

Old Rocky placed himself in immediate position for work, having his back against a tree, and a ready revolver in each hand.

The little lawyer was hopping around like a born lunatic, with his huge green umbrella over his shoulder, waiting for a chance to use it.

The opportunity was not long in coming, for a brawny Blackfoot brave sprung out of the thicket, and confronted the white dwarf with upraised tomahawk.

He made a slashing sweep through the air with the weapon, but either miscalculated the height of his opponent, or else the lawyer drew in his head like a turtle. At any rate the blow failed to take effect, and the Indian was swung half-way round by the extreme violence of his efforts.

Old Rocky was on the point of firing one of his revolvers, but the lawyer was ahead of him and crash came his old green umbrella against the head of the offending red-man. Either he put more muscular power into the blow, knowing certainly that he was now dealing with a foe, and not a friend masquerading, or else the Indian received it at a more effective point than had Old Rocky, for certain it is he went over like a nine-pin, only his arms and legs were flying in the air like so many appendages to a wind-mill, such as the fabled Don Quixote charged in days of yore.

Although two of the Blackfeet had been disposed of in this summary way, there were still others to take their places, and presently Old Rocky had his hands too full to pay particular heed to his little companion, though he cast a glance toward him now and then, to see that nothing serious had happened to the diminutive specimen of lively humanity.

From all quarters the Blackfeet now rushed into the glade, and while a few assailed the active little lawyer, the major portion of them assaulted the hunter, recognizing in him one to whom they owed the death of the brave who had been shot, and knowing that the most deadly resistance would come from him.

When Old Rocky's revolvers began to play, it was a lively time assuredly, for even in the half gloom he was not the man to waste his bullets.

In the mean time the lawyer was amazing those of the Indians who had assailed him by

the wonderful dexterity with which he leaped from side to side and up into the air like a born gymnast.

He rained in his blows upon them so fast, striking right and left indiscriminately, and put so much effectiveness into them, that it seemed like attempting to storm an old-fashioned threshing machine with all the flying flails in motion.

One after another they received the full benefit of his blows. They rolled over each other, such was the rapidity with which they were felled.

Several lay quiet upon the ground. It may have been because they were knocked senseless or through strategy, either fearing to face that unknown weapon again, or else hoping for some chance to overcome the savage little fighter by remaining recumbent.

How it would all end there could be no telling, of course, but if numbers had much to do with it, the game was ultimately in the hands of the red-men, for they outnumbered their adversaries almost ten to one.

Old Rocky had about emptied his revolvers, and accomplished great execution with them, considering the uncertainty of his aim. Against the effectiveness of this, he had found two things to contend against, the darkness and the continual moving of his enemies.

He had managed to cripple the force of the attacking party considerably, however, and was well satisfied with his work as he quickly replaced his revolvers and drew the long, ugly looking bowie-knife that had erstwhile reposed so peacefully in his belt.

Giving a truly diabolical yell which was quite enough to make any one's hair stand on end, and which he was pleased to term his war-cry, the old Rocky Mountain ranger threw himself upon the foe, determined to make a gallant showing before he took to his heels, for this he felt sure must be the ultimate result of the matter, as they two could hardly expect to make way with the half-score of braves who still remained uninjured and fought like fiends incarnate for the scalps of the two whites.

The only bother was in relation to the little lawyer. How was he to be gotten away?

His short legs had shown an amazing amount of activity, but it could be hardly expected that in a rush for life and death through the dark forest, leaping over logs and brushwood, plunging into dense ravines and undergoing all such annoyances, the lawyer could make good headway.

Still there might be no other way, and Old Rocky was not fool enough to consider it incumbent upon him to be captured along with the lawyer simply because he was in his employ. Besides, free, he might and probably would be able to effect the ultimate escape of his companion, but if they were both prisoners their chances would be few indeed.

There was no telling how it would turn out.

The little lawyer evidently had no intention of being captured, for he was still thrashing away with as good will as ever.

His enemies had fired and hurled all their weapons at him, but the effect was not gratifying, for the jumping harlequin appeared to bear

a charmed life, and none of the missiles were in the least effective.

It was at this time that Old Rocky plunged into the fight, knife in hand. He was a perfect whirlwind, but he found men opposed to him who also knew how to handle the weapon and for a time it seemed as though he might have to turn tail after all and fly to save his own life.

As for the lawyer, the violence of his actions was wearing him out and his gyrations were not so emphatically funny as they had been a short time previous. Still he managed to make it lively for the three or four red-skins who surrounded him, and was evidently quite capable of holding out as long as Old Rocky chose to continue the resistance.

The valiant ranger now found himself in something of a predicament, for he was forced to place his back against a tree and continue to defend himself. As to assuming the offensive, the time for that had gone by now, and he was obliged to use the utmost caution in order to make sure that one of his antagonists did not manage to get in a telling blow and thus end the spirited contest.

Thus the good fight went on.

Had these two been left to themselves there could have been but one end to the affair, for the red scoundrels would have tired them out eventually and then ended the struggle.

It happened, however, that the noise of the combat reached other ears, and two men made their way through the forest toward that quarter.

They came in the nick of time. One of the Indians had lighted a torch, and by the glare of this several of the others were chasing the old scout around a fallen tree, with guns in their hands.

It was an exciting scene, and the old scout never made better time in his life than he did when dashing around that tree. One of the wily red-skins knew a trick or two, and halting in his tracks, he waited for the scout to come around.

Old Rocky was promptly on hand, and seeing the threatening danger, dodged in time to let the Indian's leaden missile strike another of the red-men in his rear. Then, leaping forward, he had brained the fellow with a blow from his clubbed rifle ere he could offer any resistance.

Thus the circumstance that had seemed about to prove a fatal one to the old ranger turned around and rid him of two enemies.

The chase was continued, for there were still four red-skins after him, more determined than ever. At this moment the two men who had been breaking their way through the bushes came upon the scene.

Their weapons soon sounded and the Indians, minus two more of their number, took the alarm at this fresh arrival. Those who were able scampered away while the wounded ones crawled into the bushes or feigned death.

Two men came into view. The torch that the Indian had held had by some queer accident stuck upright in the earth and continued burning, so that the two who had fought so long and valiantly were able to see the new-comers.

They were white men, one dressed in the garb of a hunter, while the other seemed to be in the

undress uniform of a commissioned officer of the army, although he carried no sword. His attire too had the appearance of having seen rather rough usage, and with this much of a clew, the reader would not have great difficulty in recognizing the two whom we saw wandering upon the prairie.

The two old hunters came to a sudden pause and stared at each other as though both of them were looking upon ghosts.

Such was indeed the thought uppermost in their minds, for their story was a strange one on both sides. A couple of years previous they had been chums, ready to die for each other. Some dispute arose and it came to blows. This could only result in a duel, for they were on Texan soil and the code was much in vogue there.

Through some mistake both men were reported killed, when they were only wounded, but as their factions immediately indulged in a free fight, in which broken heads were plenty, the affair was considerably mixed up. It was natural, however, that the two men, while being nursed back to life should be made to believe that the other was dead, for their friends thought so themselves.

Up to this time fate had kept the two old hunters widely apart, so that each had no suspicion of the other's being alive, and believing his hand was red with the blood of one who had been so dear, a dreariness would occasionally come upon both, that must have seemed rather strange to their companions.

Fancy then the extreme joy of this meeting, when for the first time they learned that their hands were not dyed in the blood of a friend, and that this old comrade was still alive.

They embraced each other with tears in their eyes, and a suspicious trembling of the voice. It was hard for them to believe the truth, but gradually it became clearer, and they realized how they had deceived themselves and been deluded by fate.

While they were still engaged in explanations, another scene was being enacted close at hand though of a somewhat different nature.

The little lawyer had quieted down after the engagement was over, but had watched the meeting of the two old rangers with wondering eyes. Turning his gaze upon the companion of Strategy Saul, he might have been observed to start as if he too had seen a ghost.

Then a cunning expression came over his face.

"By my soul, it is Tom Reynolds. Now will I interview him and get him to sign my contract ere I inform him of the joyful tidings that his old uncle has gone the way of all flesh, and left him half his property. Arouse ye shades of Blackstone and Coke within my breast so that I err not in presenting my case."

Thus muttering to himself the diminutive mummy approached the soldier. He had intended that his manner should be dignified but his step was something between a hop, skip and jump that reminded one very much of a cricket's spring upon being touched.

Gaining a position in front of the young man, whom, in company with Strategy Saul we have seen pass through such deadly perils, he made a bow that would have done honor to a disciple of Chesterfield.

"Have I the honor of addressing Thomas Reynolds, nephew of Squire Robert Reynolds of Cedar Croft?"

"The soldier trying to keep back the smile that appeared determined to come upon his sad face, replied:

"I don't know much about the honor, but I am Tom Reynolds, and the Squire was my uncle. I say was for I have believe he must be dead by this time," replied the soldier, without evincing much emotion, for the old man had been cold and stern, and he had never seen enough of him to learn to love him.

"Correct, sir, quite correct. The old Squire lay down and peacefully passed away from sheer old age. His will was read, sir, and it left you half of his immense estate on condition, sir, that you appeared to claim it within a certain length of time. That stipulated period will have elapsed, sir, some time before you could possibly reach Cedar Croft."

Here he paused to see what effect this would have upon the other, for it was equivalent to saying that the half million was now assuredly lost to him.

Somewhat to his amazement the young man showed not the least sign of emotion.

"Bless me," muttered the dried-up little lawyer, "he cares as little for half a million as I do for a dollar. Did I ever behold such a spectacle? Poor chance that to get my contract signed. However, I make a bold effort.

"There are technicalities of the law, sir," he resumed, aloud, "which will bring about another course. Others may not see them, and would deem your chances small of ever possessing your legacy, but the eagle eye of Catiline Demosthenes Neverfail, sir,"—here he struck an attitude *a la Napoleon*, with one hand in the bosom of his coat and the other behind his back—"has discovered the flaw, and there is not the least doubt but that he can place you into possession of your rightful property at any time.

"I have traveled hundreds of weary miles, sir, and braved the dangers that are generally unknown to members of my craft, sir, in order to find you, and it would please me very much for you to place your signature upon this paper. 'Strike while the iron is hot' is always my motto. This is merely a contract to pay me five thousand dollars when I succeed in placing you in possession of your property."

The soldier glanced over the paper by the light of the still blazing torch. He was amused at the business ways of the cunning little lawyer, though he did not seem to care much about the matter.

"I promise to sign it at a more opportune time. No, that will not do. Well, I must say you deserve a reward for your pertinacity and pluck, though how you ever found me here unless some of them at the fort put you on my trail, I am at a loss to tell."

With a lead pencil the soldier wrote the name:

"CAPTAIN THOMAS DUDLEY REYNOLDS."

Then he handed the paper to the little lawyer and turning toward the two rangers gave the man of briefs to understand that their interview was over.

The lawyer read the name several times and

then looked up with an expression of crafty cunning upon his face, muttering, while his eyes rested on the soldier:

"Spirit of the departed Webster, my star is in the ascendant. This is not the man I sought, but the other heir. My soul be on thy guard and it will be two birds with one stone. This is the other Tom Reynolds."

CHAPTER XII.

MORE BITTER THAN DEATH.

"HEAVEN help me, I fear I shall go crazy, for remorse is gnawing at my heart. Why did I do it, oh, why? Wronged though I have been until my wrongs cry out to Heaven, who made me judge and jury to try him unheard, and condemn him to that most horrible death?

"Oh, wretch that I am, would that death could rid me of this haunting presence! He whom I loved so well, so truly, with that unquenchable affection that time can never destroy, alas! the poor satisfaction of knowing that the grave had claimed him, is denied me. And worse, far worse, it was my hand that dealt the crushing blow.

"Once, when my heart was hot with passion, I fancied that the greatest boon I could ask from an avenging Providence would be a terrible death for the man whom I sought. Now all is changed, and when it is too late I would give my life to call him back again.

"Ah! how noble he looked, standing there and defying us to do our worst. Courage he had that was almost sublime. What matters it if my life is wrecked through him? Two wrongs do not make a right; and now that he is dead, will it do me any good? Oh, fool—fool that I was! He might have married me yet, and now my only chance is gone."

The girl wrung her hands in agony for fully a minute, and then resumed her soliloquy which seemed full of bitterness.

"Woe is me. Time shall come and go, the seasons bring blessings in their train for others, but for me all is black as death. With my own hands I have molded my future; as I have made my bed so must I lie, and may Heaven be merciful enough to send me a speedy release from this dreary world. Oh, Tom, my love, forgive the cruel blow that came through my hand, forgive the cruel heart. Once I vowed to love you through good and evil report. How have I kept that vow?"

She shuddered at the question.

Her hand was red with the blood of the man who had been lover and husband, and for whom she had willingly given up the world with all its vanities.

There was no longer rest and happiness for her sinful soul. Forget she could not, and as long as she remembered the scenes of that terrible night, would her soul cry out in horror. Already was she suffering the torments of the damned, and the future looked horrible indeed to her eyes.

She had been one of the most innocent and confiding creatures in the world before this blow struck home, but deep down within her fiery nature had reposed that demon who was now making himself known to her, and when the proper time came he showed his fangs,

To such a nature remorse would come as an overwhelming flood, and so it was when she began to comprehend the enormity of her crime.

She remembered the Bible instructions "judge not that ye be not judged," and here she had not only condemned the man she loved so well, unheard, but had actually had him executed.

The moon was hanging in the eastern sky, and as the trees were scattered at this point, her light managed to enter and illuminate the spot around her. She was seated upon a log, in an attitude of despair, for the thoughts that ran riot in her brain seemed to be killing her.

She was unconscious of the fact that she was not alone in the patch of forest.

A human figure was making its way along through the undergrowth, and by keeping directly on, must pass very near to where she sat.

Finally she heard the sound of footsteps close beside her, and looked up hastily.

A man had come to a halt within a dozen feet of her, and half raised his rifle as if uncertain who this lovely figure could be.

The moonlight, falling upon his face revealed both it and his figure to the amazed girl, and she stood there, just where she had sprung, as if firmly rooted to the spot.

It was Thunderbolt Tom!

Yes, the man whom she had seen go to his death stood before her. The moonlight illumined her face, which was now devoid of mask, and as her hat was off, the jetty black curls hung far down her back, but though a look of wonder appears upon the face of the young man, no trace of recognition gleamed from his eye.

This, however, the other had no chance to notice just then, for her amazement at seeing him alive was powerful enough to over-ride all other fancies and thoughts.

She stood there devoid of motion. Her breath no longer came and went, and it seemed as though in this terrible minute even her heart refused to execute its usual functions, and stood still. At first it was but natural to believe that her remorse had called up the spirit of the dead hunter, and it was this that took her breath away so completely, but Adele was no believer in ghosts and presently discovered that he whom he might, the man before her was an actual, living, breathing reality.

Then with her returning breath she cried out, and her words were but a mention of his name—

"Thunderbolt Tom!"

The young hunter had not strongly suspected that his masked enemy was a woman, and he was therefore very much astonished at what he saw, but being angry at the other for having involved him in such a terrible scrape as that had been with the wolves, he allowed his righteous indignation to over-ride his curiosity as to what this woman hated him for.

"Yes, it is Thunderbolt Tom, alive and in the flesh, but no thanks to you that this is so. If your wishes had been granted the wolves in the den on the mountain would, ere this, have picked my bones clean. What prevents my sending a bullet through your heart now? I

know you are a woman and by the stars that is the only thing that prevents my punishing your fiendishness as it so richly deserves!"

The young hunter's words burned like fire, such was the heat of his honest indignation, but Adele was too glad to know that her wickedness had not accomplished its work, to notice this. Besides, she knew she deserved more stinging words of reproach, and with her hands clasped and extended toward him, she cried out:

"Tom, oh, Tom, do you not know me?"

A scornful smile played upon his face.

"Know you? Yes, I know you as one who hated me so bitterly that she would have given me to the fiends of Hades to torture, had such a thing been possible; whose venom went so far as to cast me into a den of wolves, but like Daniel of old, I came out from among the wild beasts unscathed. Beyond that, woman, traitress to the purity and gentleness of your sex, I know you not."

"Not know me. Tom, oh, my darling, what words are these? Not know your Adele, she whom you swore you loved above all things on earth? Heaven help me, I must indeed be going mad when he to whom my heart was given says he knows me not," half-wailed the strange girl.

"It is false, false as Hades!" cried the young hunter vehemently, "I never loved but one in all my life, and she, oh, Father in Heaven—"

"And she?" eagerly repeated the girl, her magnetic black eyes fastened upon his face.

"Is dead. I wept tears of blood upon her grave, and there, too, I buried my heart. Oh, Millie, my darling, my angel love, to think that when last we parted it was in anger," and overcome by this sudden emotion, Tom let his head fall upon his breast.

Afterward it came to Adele that she had met the Millie he spoke of and whom he thought dead, but at this time, the thought never entered her head. She heard him disown her and declare that he had never loved her, and this was enough to engross her full attention. Her great black eyes opened with the horror that possessed her soul, and she was dumb for a time. Then her anguish burst forth, and it was like a stream rushing over its banks.

"Say not so, I implore you. Take away the fact of your loving me in the happy past and you remove the support that keeps me alive. I know that I sinned grievously in plotting for your death, but my heart was enraged because you deserted me. You will forgive me, Tom, and take me back to your heart?" she implored.

"Since you ask it I will forgive you, but as for the other I must insist that I do not know you. Either you are crazy or else mistaken, I do not know which. Do not cross my path again, or I may forget that you are a woman and do you injury."

"Little do I care. You can add that and I will bless you with my dying breath. You have said you never knew me. Can you deny that you are Tom Reynolds?" she demanded, almost fiercely.

"I can not nor do I attempt to for I have never done aught that I am ashamed of. At the same time I take occasion to add that I

never had the honor of your acquaintance, if honor there can be in knowing one who thinks nothing of masquerading around the country in male attire and—"

"Hush!"

The word fell from her lips in an imperious manner, and Thunderbolt Tom ceased. Somehow, though he felt an outward contempt for this creature who persisted in claiming him as a dear friend or lover or something of the sort, deep down in his heart he acknowledged that there were many things about her manner that claimed at least respect, and now the very look of insulted womanhood froze upon his lips the mad words he would have uttered in his anger.

"You have said enough," she continued, in that full, rich voice that impressed him so powerfully, "and now nothing on earth could bring us together again. Your desertion nearly killed me but I have tracked you far and found you to learn that in your eyes the past is a thing utterly forgotten and as for poor Adele Cummings, you know her not."

"Sad was the hour when I learned how you had deceived me, but this present minute is more bitter than death itself. Farewell, Tom, my lost love, a long farewell. Death alone can comfort me, the grave rest my throbbing brain and broken heart. May Heaven forgive you this terrible wrong even as does Adele, once your wife, lost forever now."

Before he could do aught to stop her she had given him one last mournful look that would haunt him for many a day and turning fled into the forest, vanishing like a wraith.

The mystery was deepening. It was hardly probable that she was crazy, for she seemed to know his name and spoke of him as one whom she had loved, but Thunderbolt Tom denied having ever seen her before.

Whether he was truthful or otherwise in this denial, the reader will have to judge for the present, but the truth of his guilt or innocence will be made manifest before long. Tom had a good character among the rangers of the Northwest and although it seemed that he and Millie, being lovers, had separated, still the fact of his thinking her dead had much to do with his not making his appearance again to confess himself at fault and make up the foolish lovers' quarrel that had separated them.

Tom looked after her retreating form in wonder until it had vanished from view; then with a long-drawn sigh for the one who had left him professedly to seek for death, he turned and made his way through the forest more like a man in a dream than one awake.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTAIN'S STORY.

WHATEVER the dried-up little mummy of a lawyer learned from the name signed to the document, he appeared highly pleased, though with wonderful tact he kept the source of his amusement a profound secret.

At times his wizened face would be actually illuminated with a broad smile, and as he rubbed his skinny little hands one over the other, a dry, peculiar laugh that was almost a chuckle, would escape his lips.

With the exception of the soldier, it seemed a happy party, for the two old rangers were so delighted over their finding each other alive, when Old Rocky supposed he had the blood of Strategy Saul upon his hands, and *vice versa*, that they seemed to be continually shaking hands, as if it was next to impossible to congratulate each other enough, while the lawyer, feeling glad that some one else was happy besides himself, took occasion to make a little speech, which although lacking considerable of his usual Fourth of July orations, contained not a little good advice which they could profit by if they chose.

The words spoken by the legal gentleman in reference to his uncle the squire, appeared to have recalled some memory to the mind of the soldier which he would fain have forgotten. It resulted in his being more than usually silent, for his thoughts were busy.

What was on his mind he never told, but while the others were rejoicing and talking in a lively manner over things that mutually interested the two rangers, he sat on a log with his head resting on his hand. Once Old Rocky thought he heard a groan from the direction of the soldier, but upon looking that way saw him sitting there so silent and motionless that he concluded he must be mistaken and resumed his talk with Saul.

They were speaking of the South. Old Rocky had been there several times since their duel, and he was able to tell his companion many things about the parties they knew in the old times. There were tragic events that had happened which he narrated, and by a strange combination of circumstances he gave the story of Adele, Captain Tom Reynolds and Donald Warren, just as he had heard it, though he did not know that the "captain" he was speaking of was near him, nor did Strategy Saul for that matter, as he knew next to nothing of his companion's life history, they having been captured together by the reds, and united their fortunes in escaping, which cemented the bonds of friendship between them as only great dangers, mutually shared, can.

This was what he said:

"Another strange thing happened ter a party as ye knowed. Thet were Adele Cummings. She war deceived by a man, a captain in the army I believe, and the last heard of her she had either killed herself or followed him, for she disappeared. Some says as he murdered her, others that she killed herself when she found she wasn't his wife, and thar war many other things said. One young critter named Donald Warren tried ter make folks believe she had fled wid her paramour, but they know'd and loved her too well to believe a word o' thet, an' I led a party myself in search of this same Donald intendin' ter tar an' feather him, but he had vanished. No man dar's ter stand before me ter-day and say a word ag'in' the purity of Adele Cummings. I knowed her, and ef thar ever war an angel on this earth, she war one."

There was a movement behind them. Then Captain Tom sprung to his feet, strode over to where the two men stood, and clapped his hand upon the shoulder of the ranger, Old Rocky, to whom he addressed himself,

"Old man, you never spoke truer words in all your life. Adele Cummings was an angel if ever one trod this earth, and the man who dares to say a word to the contrary, in my presence, dies, no matter who or what he may be.

"Look well upon me, Old Rocky, for I am the man you have been talking about, the captain. Nay, start not, my friend; I do not cherish any ill-feeling against you. Whatever I might have thought has been fully wiped out by your noble defense of my bright angel love, Adele."

He paused to let his head fall upon his hands, and though the two rangers turned their heads away and winked violently at the stars, they did not prevent their seeing the tears roll through the fingers of the soldier. Finally he seemed to master his emotion and looked up with a sad smile.

"Pardon me, my friends, but the memory of the happy past has completely unmanned me. The tortures of the Inquisition could not force a groan from my lips, but when agony wrings the heart, then it must find an utterance.

"If you will give me your attention, I will briefly tell you my sad story, so far as it pertains to Adele Cummings, and perhaps Old Rocky may be able to throw a little light upon what has been up to this hour obscured in darkness to me.

"I met Adele last summer while on a furlough of a few months and transacting some special Government business in the South. We loved at first sight, for it seemed as though some responsive chord in our souls drew us together.

"Oh, the memory of those days of bliss! I shall never forget them while I live. All the earth seemed glorified because of our great love; but I shall pass over briefly what I could with rapture dwell upon for hours. Suffice it to say that we loved as man and woman can love but once in a lifetime, and that nothing would have been too great a sacrifice to that great affection that lasts beyond the grave.

"Circumstances would not allow me to marry Adele publicly. I was the prospective heir of a rich old miser—the same whose demise leaving me half his property, our friend here has told us about—and it was one of his crotchets that I should not marry without his consent and full approval under pain of being disinherited.

"Adele and I talked the matter over and agreed upon a quiet wedding with only a couple of witnesses. This was accomplished, an old backwoods circuit-rider uniting us one night. I brought a friend of mine along, and Adele had as a witness one Donald Warren, who had once been a lover of hers, and in whom she seemed to have the greatest confidence, more so than I did myself, to tell the truth.

"For two weeks our wedded life was indeed like a honeymoon, and then the great calamity befell me which I am about to relate.

"I must tell you that we had formed quite a neat little plot for getting ahead of my old uncle.

"It was our intention to smuggle Adele into the house as an attendant, which could easily be done, as she was a distant relation of our family, and I knew that when she came thus, the old man, being unprejudiced, would soon love

her devotedly, and I would not have the least trouble in pacifying him when the truth was made known.

"We were never given a chance, however, of putting this nice plan into execution, for ere the opportunity occurred, the blow fell with stunning force.

"One day—shall I ever forget it?—I left home on business, intending to return by the following evening. Full of love for my darling and anticipating no evil, I drew near our cabin home.

"Suddenly a man sprung out of the bushes and confronted me. It was Donald Warren. I could see that his face was full of terror. He caught my arm and I tried to ask him what was the matter but my tongue refused its office and clung to the roof of my mouth.

"In a few words he told me. Adele was gone. She had vanished in the night. There was a letter for me in the cabin which he had opened and read, hoping to gain some intelligence.

"Breaking from him I ran to the cabin, my face white as death, yet with a strange calmness upon me. Yes, there was a letter upon the table, opened as Donald had said, and addressed in the writing I knew so well. I have preserved it to this day. Let me read the cruel lines to you, word for word."

He took from the lining of his coat, where it had escaped the scrutiny of the Indians when he was searched by them, a piece of paper that looked as though it had been handled many times. Old Rocky puffed his pipe close beside it and this gave fitful flashes of light sufficient to enable him to read, for he knew the cruel mis- sive by heart at any rate.

"MY HUSBAND:—You will curse the hour when first you met me when you learn that I have fled with one whom I loved long ere I met you. He has persuaded me that we were married in the sight of Heaven before the ceremony between you and I was performed, and that I am therefore his wife. Do not mourn for me too long; there are others who will love you better than I have done. Search for me would be useless. Remember me only as
"Your lost, ADELE."

"That is the letter I received, my friend, and it well-nigh destroyed my reason. What is your opinion of it, Old Rocky?" asked the captain turning to the ranger.

"False—false as the hand that wrote it. I tell 'ee, Captain Tom, my life on it Adele never put her hand ter that paper 'less she war mad!" ejaculated the old prairie man, vehemently.

"You are right, my noble friend. The thought never came into my head, and future incidents only strengthened the suspicion that there had been foul play. For the time being, however, the shock was so severe as to prostrate my mind. I hardly know what I did; for the fact that my darling was lost to me seemed to unsettle my reason.

"I remember of even accusing Donald Warren, who had been a friend through all, of having a part in this vile scheme, and to this day I can remember the look of terror on his face. Perhaps it was my wild appearance and seeming crazy state that alarmed him, and at the same time it may have been something else,

"I do not remember what I did, but if I attempted violence upon Donald he escaped me. I was rushing wildly through the forest, calling on my darling's name and praying Heaven to bring me face to face with the villain who had brought this black desolation upon my heart and home, when a rifle belched out its contents from the bushes and I fell to the earth like a corpse.

"When I recovered my consciousness I found myself under a pile of brushwood, which had been thrown upon me by the man who had shot me. By a great effort I managed to crawl out from under this, and then fainted again. Here I was found by an old settler, who lived a sort of hermit life in the heart of the forest. He carried me to his cabin, and for weeks and months I hovered between life and death.

"Gradually I became myself, and when able to talk, heard that no one could tell whither Adele had gone, but that the report was abroad that she had been murdered by me for some reason. Horrified as I was that this idea should have entered the minds of those I had looked upon as friends, I had neither the time nor the inclination to set them aright.

"From other words that he spoke I drew my conclusions, and realized upon whose shoulders the whole blame rested. It was reported that Donald Warren had shot at me, being fired with vengeance because he had once loved Adele, and had gone in search of me.

"This news opened my eyes considerably, and in these seeming actions of a friend I saw the cunning plot of an arch-villain. He had ruined my life and hers in revenge because I had won the girl he loved, and who had never had aught but friendship for him.

"My heart was at once filled with thoughts of revenge. If I could but meet this double-dyed villain, perhaps I might make him confess his share in the matter, and also what had become of my darling Adele. I resolved to track him to the death, and to have a terrible revenge for the ruin he had put upon my life.

"Months had elapsed since the disappearance of my darling, and much valuable time had been lost, but without even waiting to set the people aright concerning me, I got upon the trail of Donald Warren and commenced following it, determined to make the villain suffer as much as I had done for his treachery, his attempt to murder me, and all combined.

"I pursued my course with the assiduity of a sleuth-hound, and in so doing found myself in the Northwest. While I was yet upon the track the Blackfeet gobbled me up, and I found myself a prisoner in their clutches. At their village, I discovered that Strategy Saul here had also been captured, and at the first opportunity we united our fortunes and set about effecting our escape.

"The rest you know. What means this fiend in human shape took to lure my wife away I do not know, but the report about my being a villain and she deceived was false—false as the heart of the man who circulated it, for never was woman loved as I loved Adele Cummings, my lawfully-wedded wife."

Just at this point of the story, when Captain Tom had probably reached the end, they were

all amazed to hear a slight crackling of the underbrush close by; and then an exclamation in a female voice caught their ears, saying:

"Heavens! it is Tom—alive and well!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HAND OF FATE.

SOMEWHAT startled by this, our friends looked in the direction from whence the voice came. They could see something white and mystic, but could make nothing clear out of it, although it seemed as though it might be a female form clothed in white.

The pipe of the old ranger was still working like a young volcano, being an unusually large one, and no doubt the light flaring up, had illuminated the countenance of Captain Tom just as he was finishing his story and declaring vehemently that woman was never so well loved as Adele had been by him.

Of course the effect of this intrusion upon their camp could not be otherwise than startling, and every one of the four men had his eyes glued upon the figure so dimly seen through the bushes.

The only thought that seized possession of the captain's mind, was that this was his lost Adele.

He had not been able to distinguish her voice, but the words that had been used led him to infer it.

His blood seemed to leap through his veins with the speed of a race-horse, for could he but find the beloved one whom he had long since given up as lost to him forever, Heaven could grant him no richer blessing. He was stupefied for the time being and then sprung erect, full of life and determination.

"Adele, my darling, my lost love! is it you? Wait for me, do not flee I pray you, sweet wife. It is I, your husband, who loves you so well!"

As he uttered these plaintive words the stricken captain commenced to advance toward the figure as seen in the darkness; but it retreated. All of them heard a cry full of dismay and piteous terror, as if the words of the captain had struck more keenly to the heart of the girl than the belief of his death that had up to this time been so overwhelmingly planted in her brain.

There was no mystery about it as the reader will readily understand when it is said that the figure in white was no other than Millie, the betrothed of Thunderbolt Tom, whom last we saw, fleeing through the forest after holding that interview with the disguised Adele.

She had come upon the little camp of our friends by the merest accident, and was just in time to hear the last words uttered by the captain.

Then the old ranger's pipe flared up and illumined the countenance of the soldier. Of course no other thought entered the mind of the young girl but that she was gazing upon the face of Thunderbolt Tom, the man whom she loved with all her heart and soul, and who, she thought, had been torn to pieces among the wolves in the den of Black Wallace.

But for the words he had uttered she might have come to him, and at any rate explanations would have ensued that would have made the

captain crazy with delight, though Millie would have found poor consolation in the knowledge that after all her Tom must have been devoured by the wolves on that fateful night.

His words, however, struck such a pang to her loving heart that she turned and fled from the spot, not wanting Tom to overtake her and discover his error.

Through the forest she flitted like a spirit.

The captain pursued, but soon discovered that he was making poor progress, for the white form seemed to be leaving him. In vain he cried out, imploring her to come back to him, and protesting his great love; she would not turn, knowing that it was Adele he meant.

Finally, the captain could no longer see the white form flitting in advance of him, and was induced by this circumstance to give up the chase, though he did it most unwillingly. He turned to retrace his steps. His mind was filled with thoughts of this woman he loved so devotedly, and after this meeting with one whom he believed to be her, his excitement must have been intense, so that anything could be forgiven him.

His main idea was that Adele had become distracted from the suffering through which she had passed, and either did not know his voice, or, believing that he had deserted her so basely, leaving that terrible note behind him, she had fled from him in fear and disgust.

At any rate he knew she was in the forest, and he was determined never to leave there until he had found her and told her the true story of that fatal mistake.

Although she had fled from him as he really believed, yet could he but find her he would convince her how grievously she had judged him.

As for the villain whom he had followed to the wilds of the Northwest, he had best keep clear of the enraged husband, for the fury of Hades would not be more terrible, now that he had learned why Donald Warren was in the lonely region.

So full of such thoughts was Captain Tom that he did not realize the fact of his not going in the proper direction. Many things conspired to mislead him, and all at once he awoke to the fact that he was lost, or, as an Indian might in his pompous pride have put it, "the camp was lost."

After wandering about for some time and realizing that he was getting further in the forest, the captain concluded to give up the attempt and wait until morning before attempting to find his friends. In his mad rush after the shadowy figure that had appeared to them, he had gone further than any of them had thought, and as they knew Indians were as thick as blackberries in the vicinity and Captain Tom still cherished fond memories of his recent captivity, he was not very able to shout out to any great extent.

Selecting a hollow tree he entered the cavity and prepared to sleep, for he needed rest very much.

The night wore on and Captain Tom was sleeping soundly when in a dream he heard the voice of a demon hurling maledictions upon him. This seemed to arouse him, and as he started up to his surprise, he heard a deep voice that re-

sembled the rumbling of thunder, followed by many more, only they were loud and shrill, making one intuitively think of a flock of ducks quacking furiously.

"Indians, by Jove!" muttered the captain.

It was true. During the time he had slept the Blackfeet had gathered in the immediate vicinity and when he ventured to look out, there were a dozen of the red-men within as many feet of him.

They had built a fire and seemed to be holding a confab of some sort, judging from their excited demeanor. He noticed that they were almost directly in front of the cavity in the tree, and wondered that he had not been discovered long since. The only reason he could assign for their not seeing him was that they were too busily engaged in debating the point that had come up among them.

It could not be long, however, before some of their keen eyes would discover him, and then all would be lost. As a sensible man therefore it behooved him to get out of the scrape in the quickest possible time. There was only one way of leaving the tree, and this was by the same means as he had taken to come in. As the fire of the Indians was momentarily growing brighter this would be a serious thing.

Dropping upon his hands and knees, and screening his body as well as possible under the circumstances, Captain Tom commenced moving.

He gradually issued from the hollow tree in this way. So far so good. His next effort was to place it between his foes and himself. While he was still in the act of accomplishing this he saw a move on the part of the red-skins.

One of them suddenly directed the attention of the others to the ground, and immediately they were all intensely interested. The truth was patent. They had discovered the trail left by the captain where he came to the hollow tree.

By following this up they would quickly find him unless he vanished the place. This he proceeded to do with all speed possible. Before he made a move, however, he saw the Indians advancing toward the hollow tree, their eyes fastened upon the ground.

Captain Tom waited to see no more, but commenced crawling away at as rapid a pace as possible, determined to reach shelter if it could be done, before the red hounds discovered his late hiding-place.

Just as he was crawling into the fringe of protecting bushes, a chorus of exclamations caught his ear. Then he knew that the Indians had come upon the hollow tree, and noted the fact of its not having an occupant. Now was the most critical moment, for their eyes would naturally be roaming about, and if they were to discover him at all the time was at hand.

His thoughts were interrupted by a shrill yell, just as he was pulling his feet into the thicket.

The light of the Indians' fire had betrayed him. There was no need of further secrecy. Tom cast one look over his shoulder, and seeing the whole posse of red-skins on the jump for his place of hiding, sprung to his feet, turned upon them, and with the revolver that Old Rocky had loaned him sent several shots into their midst.

Of course this had the effect of demoralizing the Indians for the time being, and as they hastened to shelter themselves Tom sprung away.

He ran like a hound, and considering the nature of the ground his pace was wonderful indeed. The Indians, seeing that their intended quarry had no further intention of resisting them, left their various places of shelter and resumed the mad chase.

Over logs, bushes and rocks, through dense portions of the forest glens and over ridges the captain dashed, knowing full well that his safety depended upon his heels, though he might weave cunning in with it.

The night was dark, a heavy bank of clouds hanging in the western sky. This assisted the soldier while at the same time it retarded his progress, though for that matter the same kind service was performed for the red-skins in pursuit.

He was a rapid runner and had a way of overcoming obstructions that was very apt to give him an advantage in the race.

That he was gaining was soon made manifest, for the sounds of the pursuit grew less in volume, as if the Indians were one after another giving up the chase. Still there seemed to be one brave who kept up the pursuit and appeared to be gaining. When the captain realized that this was the case, and that the others had fallen off, he determined not to run from one man.

His resolution was ably seconded, for at this time he suddenly came upon the bank of the river. At this point it was some ten feet or more to the water, and he would have been obliged to leap over, had he not determined to turn.

Revolver in hand he wheeled.

The Indian came dashing on, and as soon as Captain Tom could catch the outlines of his form he gave him the contents of one chamber of his revolver.

That was quite enough. The red-skin went over with only a grunt that sounded as if the last atom of breath had been knocked from his body by the concussion. Although Captain Tom did not hear any more of the red-skins on his track he concluded that it would be wise for him to leave the place as speedily as possible.

Ten minutes later he was down by the edge of the water, cooling his heated brow and getting a drink. The bank arose above him, jutting out so that it afforded quite a screen. In case of a rain he could not have found a better hiding-place so far as shelter was concerned, and he resolved to remain there until morning, when he could search for his comrades with some hopes of success.

As some hours must yet elapse ere the dawn of day, he threw himself down upon the strip of sand and quickly lost himself in slumber.

The time passed and still he slept, never once dreaming of the terrible awakening he was soon to have. Slowly the night wore away. The bank of heavy clouds in the west had passed away, and not a cloud dimmed the heavens. A cool, delicious breeze had sprung up, and as the gray light of morning appeared, the air was delightful.

Captain Tom was aroused suddenly for the second time within a few hours. This time it

was a shrill shriek that made him leap to his feet, without doubt a female in trouble.

As he sprung up he saw a form leap through the air and plunge into the water with a sullen thud. It was the form of a man, and yet by the manner of his descent the soldier could tell that he must have either fallen over the bank by accident or else knew nothing of diving.

He watched eagerly for the man's appearance, and soon saw him come up, but he seemed to be making feeble efforts to sustain himself. In a few seconds he vanished from view again.

"My soul, the man will be drowned!" exclaimed the chivalrous soldier, in excitement.

Hurriedly throwing off his coat and boots, he sprung into the river and swam like a fish toward the spot where the drowning man was again throwing his arms aloft preparatory to sinking a second time.

By making herculean efforts he managed to reach the drowning person just as he was about to go under again, and grasped hold of him.

Even in this situation, the captain was amazed to find that the man whom he was attempting to rescue had remarkably long hair in the form of curls, and a suspicion of the true state of affairs may have entered his mind.

He struggled hard to reach the shore, and such efforts could not fail to be crowned with success. At length the bank was reached, he staggered out and laid his inanimate burden upon the ground. Above him were the great foot-hills that gradually merged into the mountains, while on the other side the prairie and forest lay.

The gray dawn was growing apace, and objects could be recognized even at some little distance.

When he had recovered his breath in a degree, the captain knelt down beside the person he had saved; as he put his hand upon the motionless chest, he learned what he had before suspected—that it was a woman disguised in man's clothes. Then he gave a start, bent closer and there broke from him a heart-rending cry:

"Oh, my God! it is Adele, my darling!"

CHAPTER XV.

HILT TO HILT.

THE cry that Captain Tom gave utterance to was the strangest one that could be imagined. It was a mingling of intense anguish at seeing her lying there as white as death, supreme joy because he had found her at all, and anxiety for her welfare.

He bent closer and gazed into the loved face with a look that was beyond description. Oh! was she dead? Had he taken her from the hungry water only to have her die thus? The strong man's frame was racked with emotion. Wildly he called upon her name, using every endearing epithet he could think of, but still they failed to call her back to life.

Then he bent down and kissed her passionately, but she gave no answering pressure. Her lips were cold as ice and her face white as alabaster.

Who could describe the anguish of that man, when, after having hope revived in his breast by the story told by Old Rocky, he was doomed to look upon this heart-rending spectacle? She could not be dead! Heaven would not be so cruel as to do this thing. Surely they had suf-

fered enough already without this crowning agony being added to his life.

He sprung up with his hands clinched in his hair. What was the matter with his sluggish brain? Why could he not think of some method in common use for restoring drowning persons? Thus he stood for a full minute until he had become somewhat calmer, and all the while his brain was at work.

Then he stooped down and went to work, placing Adele with her head elevated a trifle and her face toward the ground. He tore off the velvet coat, rolled up the shirt sleeves and rubbed her arms vigorously.

She was not so far gone as if she had sunk for the third time and remained under for a minute or so, and his labor soon showed its result.

He could feel a faint beating of the heart, then there was a quivering of the lips and a twitching of the eyelids. Encouraged by this he persevered and in a few minutes more saw her eyes open and fasten in bewilderment upon his face.

Then a deathly whiteness came upon her again and he could hear her murmur:

"Oh, Tom, my darling, forgive me but I have come to you across the dark river."

Evidently she thought she was dead, that her effort at suicide had been successful and that the first soul to meet her in spirit-land was that of her darling, who she thought had gone before.

Captain Tom was in an agony when he saw her sink back into this lethargy again and began to despair of saving her, when fate seemed so determined that it should not be.

Could he but find some person, he felt sure Adele's life could be saved, for he knew so precious little of the methods in use. Mentally, he cursed his stupidity, and rising, looked about him for some sign of humanity. There was a hope in his mind that perhaps he might see some signs of his friends, perhaps the smoke of their camp-fire, but this was fated to be otherwise, for at that minute these self-same friends, though not far away, were engaged in a desperate little business venture of their own and had no time for building camp-fires.

In vain the captain's eyes wandered around him, and then, with almost a forlorn hope, they were raised to the hill above, from whence there came a great howling that mystified him considerably.

Then he heard a gruff voice raised in anger and sounding more like the bellow of a mad bull than anything else. The prospect was not so very inviting, but at any rate it was a human voice, and a flash of hope darted into the young man's breast.

He did not waste time for even a second thought, but bending down, raised the beloved form of the disguised girl in his arms, and hastened up the steep ascent. The way was rough, and his burden soon became a dead weight, but love urged him on, and his progress was much more rapid than one would believe could be possible.

Up he went. All was silent above him save for the occasional howl of a wolf, sounding drearily upon the morning air. The glorious sun made his appearance in the east, lighting up the earth with his welcome rays, and still Captain

Tom continued his upward tramp, growing continually nearer the cabin on the little plateau, where Black Wallace, the wolf-herder, lived with his ugly pets.

Colorado was still with the wolf-herder, and upon this morning they were up before sunrise, for they had a little scheme in view, which it was their intention to carry out at once. Colorado had suggested it, and showed the wolf-herder how easily they could secrete themselves in the bushes and shoot down the driver and guard of the Deadwood coach, when it would be a short job to secure the box of gold which was within the coach.

Even Black Wallace had forgotten his usual caution, and was eager to be at the business which he had once followed in days of yore among the mountains of the old gold State, California. As it would take them several days to gain the route of the coach, perhaps a week, they intended losing no time when once their minds were made up.

Little did they realize how their doom was closing in upon them, and that neither would ever leave that cabin again unless it was to go to his doom. They were discussing a hasty breakfast. Their arms lay upon the floor near by, and presented quite a heterogeneous display of weapons, which in themselves spoke of some desperate undertaking in which they were about to embark.

Colorado could not get over the event that had occurred a few nights before, and every now and then he would break out in reference to it. He seemed to gloat over the terrible deed and thought it was a model way of getting rid of one whom he had hated for so long a time.

Black Wallace, on the other hand, did not appear to be in fine spirits on this morning. Something seemed to hang heavily on his mind, and he looked at it as a premonition of coming evil. Whenever he looked out upon the hungry mob of gaunt wolves he found himself shivering as he had never done before, and this fact alarmed him.

Had he possessed meat enough on hand he would have gorged the wolves, but what little he did possess they gobbled up in a twinkling and eyed him savagely. He could even imagine they were contemplating what a good meal he would make. The man whom he would send to take care of the cabin and the wolves in his absence, would have to supply meat for them unless they were left to starve.

All of this heavy feeling on his mind served to depress the spirits of the wolf-herder, and he was as gruff as a bear with a sore head as he attacked the frugal breakfast that had been prepared.

While they were thus engaged a figure crept up to the cabin from the outside, mounted the tree as had been done once before on that night when, as they thought, Thunderbolt Tom had gone to his death.

Hardly had this figure gained the loft than another appeared coming from the canon. This one was that of a girl. It was Millie Torrence, and in her hand she carried a light rifle.

There was a look upon the young girl's face

that would be hard to describe. Signs of intense suffering could be seen there, but besides this, there was a look of resolution that made her countenance that of a heroine.

She had suffered terribly since that night, when she saw Thunderbolt Tom in the clutches of his enemies. As the reader no doubt suspects, it was Millie whom Captain Tom followed through the forest on the previous night, and from chasing whom he was brought to a place where he could save the life so dear to him, that of Adele Cummings.

The young girl had thought him a specter, and when he cried out, calling her Adele and his darling, she had fled in mortal pain. Dead or alive it seemed to her that the one she loved so well belonged to the black-eyed girl who had the first claim on him. Her present visit to the cabin of the wolf-herder was to find out for certain whether Thunderbolt Tom was living or dead. In her bewilderment it was all she could think of, and she thought that those men would know the truth if any one did.

She had only caught a glimpse of that face, and even then it was by the strange light of the ranger's pipe, so that she was puzzled as to whether her imagination had not conjured up the pursuit, also the words used by Captain Tom on that occasion.

As she now came armed, and was not to be trifled with, the two men would no doubt respect her, and comply with her request.

No wonder the two were somewhat surprised when the door was pushed open, and there entered the girl whom they had held before as a prisoner, but now she held a rifle in her hands, and there was a light in her eyes that told them she was not to be trifled with.

"What do you want? Our war with you is over, and we want nothing more to do with you."

It was the wolf-herder who spoke these words.

He remembered that the girl had been some relation to Thunderbolt Tom, though he did not fully understand what it was, and by the light in her eyes he knew that she was determined to do something to avenge his death. So Black Wallace thought he would be cunning and in some manner contrive to deceive the girl. This was why he demanded of her what she wanted.

"I have come back, as you see, but do not think you can browbeat me. I am armed and ready for you, so that if you should dare to offer any violence, I shall not hesitate but will shoot you down, Black Wallace, with as little compunction as if you were a wolf. Now answer my question: did Thunderbolt Tom die the other night when you shoved him into the den of wolves? If you dare to tell me what is not the truth, I can see it from your face, and woe to you. Answer me."

Black Wallace was looking death in the face, and he knew it, too. With that little rifle covering his heart, he dared not lie, and yet, again, he dared not tell the truth, for he knew she was there to avenge the young hunter if he had in truth fallen, and that an acknowledgment of his death would meet with a prompt answer in the shape of a retributive bullet.

Perhaps after a minute's deliberation he would have declared that Thunderbolt Tom had es-

caped, and run the chances of her seeing the lie in his face and firing upon him, for his companion did not seem ready to run the risk of immolating himself upon the altar of friendship by drawing the attention of the girl to himself and thus giving the giant a chance to do something toward disarming the one who kept them both at bay with so much pluck and determination.

Just about this time, however, his eyes were attracted to some object beyond the girl, and he saw that which caused him to keep silent for a minute.

A human form, the figure of a man, was creeping upon Millie. Who this was the Rocky Mountain wolf-herder had not the least idea, but that he was friendly to their cause could be judged from the fact of his creeping upon the girl.

Noticing his delay, but not dreaming of the cause of it, Millie became impatient, and again demanded him to tell her the fate of Thunderbolt Tom, declaring that she would fire unless he spoke in ten seconds. Urged by this the wolf-herder began a rigmarole in which his only intention was to distract Millie's attention for half a minute or so, until the creeping man could get behind her.

"Ye are too hard on a poor critter, miss; we have no spite ag'in' ye. T'other night ye ran afoul o' us, an' by the orders o' our employer, the Squire, we took ye in. Then came Thunderbolt Tom an old enemy of ourn, and ye saw yerself thar war no shirkin' the fight when he pressed it, so we had to sail in. I reckon he'll pay us back for the nasty trick we played on him, for we found out arter you had fled that he warn't no more dead than the man in the moon, an' if you don't choose to believe me, I kin sw'ar ter ye on a stack of Bibles as high as a church steeple that this are a fact. Whoop!"

The last word left his lips like the whistle of a locomotive, for at that instant the man who had been creeping up behind Millie pounced upon her and made a grab for her rifle.

There was a short struggle and then the weapon was snatched from the hands of the young girl who found herself leaning against the wall of the cabin weaponless saving for a small dagger, which now gleamed in her hand.

"Good enough!" declared the wolf-herder, showing great delight, "ye done us a good turn that time, stranger. Why hello! bless my moccasins ef it ain't my old friend Donald Warren of Missouri, the very man I've been wanting to see this year back. How are ye, old feller? Shake hands on it. How is it I find you up here? Reckon thar's a female in the case for you were always the devil among women. P'raps this are the gal too. Wal, she's pretty enough for a picture an' I can't blame you. Used to be the deuce among the women myself until one went back on me. See that red scar stretchin' from ear to ear? That's whar her knife went across my throat. Wasn't her fault I lived through it, but she never knew it.

"Now, my young lady, I kin answer yer question without being compelled to tell a lie. That rifle of yours was a powerful persuasion for a man to disgrace George Washington. Thunderbolt Tom you will never see again. He

died the other night among my pets, an' if I was only as sure of falling in with a gold mine as I am that he kicked the bucket, I'd be a happy man. Yes-sir-ee, them wolves never left ha'r nor hide of him. All we found was his hat, and you can set it down fur sart'in that Thunderbolt Tom are in the land of spirits."

"*Liar!*"

The voice seemed to come from the very air and the three men started violently as they heard it.

As for Millie she was almost falling to the rough puncheon floor when she caught that word and suddenly starting up she waited for what was to follow.

Thunderbolt Tom from his position in the loft had witnessed all of the scene.

For the first time he realized that he had been basely deceived, and that his sweetheart Millie was not dead. Then the grave over which he had wept must have been that of her sister, and the person who directed him thither either unintentionally or willfully deceived him. There were only the initials *M. T.* upon the rude foot-board, but they might stand for Mary as well as Millie. At the time this thought had never occurred to him, but now the truth flashed upon him like an inspiration, and he realized that the future might yet contain great happiness for them both.

He was so overwhelmed by the discovery he had made that he was incapable of taking part in the game even when Donald Warren struggled with Millie for the possession of the rifle; but by the time Black Wallace so cruelly and emphatically declared that Thunderbolt Tom was head as a herring, that worthy thought it about time to show them all that if he was a departed spirit, returned from over the dark river, he was capable of being an exceedingly lively ghost. Therefore, as he made that forcible denial of the wolf-herder's assertion he opened the trap just as he had done on the previous occasion, and dropped down in the midst of his enemies.

The consternation of Black Wallace and Colorado can be imagined, for neither of them had the least doubt but that the wolves had torn the young hunter to pieces when he was hurled through the opening into the den by that effort on the part of the giant proprietor of the lone cabin.

Donald Warren of course took this man for Captain Tom, as others had done before him, and he was ready to join in any movement that had for its object the taking of his life.

The other two were not long either in recovering. They realized that Thunderbolt Tom had in some marvelous manner escaped from the wolf-den, and knives in hand the three sprung at him like panthers.

They met a ready blade, and while steel struck steel within, the starved wolves without howled like a pack of fiends incarnate escaped from the regions of eternal torment.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THUNDERBOLT TOM was pitted against three antagonists this time and in the same place that

had witnessed his previous fight, which had only come to an end when he pitched backward through the doorway into the den of wolves.

He had learned that his loved one was alive, and because she was there to see him, his arm would gain new strength. The first onslaught of the trio was met in a manner that amazed them, for the hunter's weapon seemed to be everywhere at once, so that their blows fell as harmless as if he had been surrounded by an invisible wall of steel.

At the same time, in a manner that was most mysterious, he managed to give several thrusts with his knife that brought blood. The pain of these cuts infuriated them and rendered their assault the more desperate. Still, Thunderbolt Tom was equal to the occasion, having much more than life to fight for, though of course he could not hold out long.

The men assailed him like so many demons, each eager to dip his knife in the heart's blood of the brave young hunter. They knew they had the advantage, and meant to keep it till the end.

When she saw these human panthers spring at her lover, Millie had sunk upon her knees and clasped her hands as though appealing to Heaven to spare him to her. Was it fated that, after finding him alive and well, even while the false-tongued giant was telling her how terribly he had died, she should see him murdered before her eyes?

All that was womanly in her nature made her weak at first, but soon this passed away and the brave spirit showed itself. She looked wildly about her, for up to this time her hands had covered her eyes to shut out the horrid sight. There was her lover still battling with all the gallantry of a knight of old against the overwhelming numbers of the foe.

Against the wall where he had thrown it after wresting it from her, was her little rifle. When she saw this Millie's eyes brightened and she gave a little cry of satisfaction. Springing to her feet, she reached the spot, and in another instant the weapon was in her hands. Then she turned, eager to use it.

There was some difficulty experienced about this, for the men were no longer separated, but appeared to be mixed up so that in their rapid evolutions she could hardly tell one from another.

The opportunity for which she waited came at last, however, and the rifle sounded. Although the bullet, striking a knife-blade, was not deadly, still it pierced the right shoulder of the giant wolf-herder, and in a degree disabled him.

Their tactics were changed, however, at this time, for while Black Wallace and Donald Warren kept the young hunter busily engaged, Colorado stepped back several paces, and drawing a revolver, proceeded to pull back the hammer with great deliberation.

Now they had the hunter foul, for he could not break from his two antagonists so as to pay any attention to Colorado, and that worthy would have things all his own way. There was a devilish malignity upon his face when he saw how matters stood.

Millie could do nothing more. She had sprung forward and grasped the arm of the desperado,

but he shook her off roughly and proceeded to aim his weapon. He seemed to enjoy the situation, knowing that he was safe and held the winning power.

The revolver was now aimed, and it seemed as though all were waiting for the shot. Even Thunderbolt Tom stood there with knife upraised, his eyes fastened upon Colorado as if fascinated, while he waited for the report that was to sound his death-knell.

It never came.

True, a report did sound, but it came from without, and the man who held the revolver, giving a wild yell, leaped spasmodically into the air and fell to the puncheon floor a corpse.

He was shot through the eye.

At the same instant, through the door came a couple of leather-clad figures which Thunderbolt Tom knew at once to be friends, and ere Black Wallace and Donald Warren could half comprehend what a turn affairs had taken, they were being vigorously assaulted by Old Rocky and Strategy Saul.

Seeing that these new-comers were fully equal to the occasion without his help, Tom bounded over to the other side of the room where Millie stood bewildered at this sudden change of the programme introduced by the advent of the buckskin-clad heroes.

She sunk upon his breast with a cry of delight and the arms of the long-separated lovers were twined around each other affectionately.

The fight was a hot one, and all the while the hungry, ravenous wolves outside kept up an infernal racket which made it seem as though a legion of tormented souls from the ever-burning brimstone lakes had escaped from their torment and come back to earth again.

Old Rocky had assailed the wolf-herder while Strategy Saul was pushing Donald Warren to the wall. Both men fought with desperation but it was of no use, for they were outmatched.

Donald soon fell with the knife of the hunter buried in his breast.

Black Wallace held out longer, but when he saw Strategy Saul advancing to the assistance of his chum he became panic-stricken.

Whether he did not know what he was doing, deliberately sought such a terrible death, or hoped to pass out from among the wolves unharmed can never be known. Certain it is that in his fright he sprung through the door at the back of the house, and landed among the ravenous animals.

The hunter seized his rifle and planted himself in the doorway, to see that Black Wallace did not get off, but there was no need of this.

The gaunt wolves sprung upon the giant like the gray fiends that they were, and his voice, once feared almost like death by them, was now unnoticed.

In vain he roared and cursed like a madman, striking out with his knife in every direction; they leaped upon him and sunk their glistening fangs into his quivering flesh.

The hunter watched until he saw the giant pulled down, and then he turned away unable to witness any more, but by the gradually decreasing cries that died away to a murmur, they knew that the wolf-herder of the Rockies had met the horrible fate to which he would have doomed our hero.

While they were recovering breath after the contest, the little lawyer made his appearance, followed by Captain Tom bearing the slight form of Adele. All were speedily informed of his adventure, and work was commenced in order to resuscitate the young woman. When she came to, she was left with Millie and the captain. Explanations must have followed, for soon after they saw her sobbing upon the breast of her husband, the captain, for she knew now that he had never written that note, but Donald Warren, who confessed his whole share in the villainy ere he died.

All was peace and joy now with our friends.

The two cousins, after much suffering, held again in their arms those whom they loved best on earth, and never again could shadows overcast their pathway. The little lawyer had obtained the signature of Thunderbolt Tom to his document, and was therefore as happy a man as could be found in the universe.

Before leaving the place, the two hunters amused themselves in cracking away at the savage wolves of whom they left not one alive. Colorado and Donald Warren were buried decently near by, and then the little party headed toward the home of Millie Torrence, where they were joyfully received and Adele provided with clothing more suitable for her sex.

After all her trials, earth seemed a Paradise to Adele, now that she learned how noble and true her husband was.

The little lawyer overcame the technicalities of the law that intervened, with a cunning that proved him well worthy of patronage, and the two cousins settled down on their great estate.

Old Rocky and Strategy Saul still roam the plains, but the first will never forget the time when he tried to palm himself off on the diminutive lawyer as Montana Mose, the terror of the prairie, and the drubbing he received for the deception.

THE END.

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